THE PROJECT OF SUCCESS

Restoring project success as phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

The 'projectification' of the firm and society (Midler 1995; Lundin and Söderholm 1998) implies a systematic translation of organizational goals into performance targets. Such targets offer not only direction for collective action, but also a solid foundation for the assessment of the achievements. To the extent that project success becomes a matter of meeting the explicit targets, it loses its relevance as independent phenomenon. For that reason, perhaps, project success is hardly ever discussed in the project management literature.

However, empirical studies demonstrate that project success is a much more complicated matter than meeting targets. While success may ultimately be justified in terms of a correspondence between aims and achievements, the understanding of both aspects is highly dependent on the project *process*. An example of a successful project that did not meet the original performance targets will serve to show that success is at matter of *perspective* as much as it is a matter of *achievement*.

Other types of research, e.g. social psychology, have addressed the issue of success more explicitly. I draw on such literature to conceptualize project success anew and to reestablish it as a researchable phenomenon in project management.

INDHOLD

INTRODUCTION

Almost 25 years ago, J.K. Pinto (1988) observed the peculiar role which the notion of success plays in the field of project management,

> *Project success is a complex and often illusory construct, but nonetheless it is of crucial importance to effective project implementation. (Pinto 1988, p. 71)*

Complex and illusory, yet crucially important – that paradoxical characterization may still be valid today. We know that companies and careers often depend upon the success of projects, and frequently are ruined by the lack of it. We also know that it is still illusory, now also in the sense of being almost completely absent from the research agenda. In the subject index of the recent Handbook on Project Management (Morris, Pinto et al. 2011) there are few and scattered entries related to success, and most of them are references to strategy, planning and other factors claimed to lead to project success.

The reason for such absence may of course be that there are no successes to study. In the words of Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius et al. (2003), projects exhibit a 'performance paradox'. We rely more and more on projects, yet they seldom succeed,

> *Many projects have strikingly poor performance records in terms of economy, environment and public support (p. 3).*

The same negative assessment is made over and over again, in many different sectors,

> *In January 2000, the* Financial Times *… reported … on the 'fiascos' of the major government information technology projects in the UK 'stemming from basic project errors' which 'highlighted the need for greater professionalism in project management … The government's track record in project management has been, to say the least, poor'* (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006, p. 7)

The celebration of projectification (Midler 1995; Lundin and Söderholm 1998) is challenged by such somber achievements. In the case of Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius et al. (2003) the calamities are documented in terms of systematic cost overruns: "In sum, the phenomenon of cost overrun appears to be *characteristic* not only of transportation projects but of projects in other fields as well" (p. 19 – italics added). Others would highlight delays and poor quality as calamities, but in short, it is failure, not success, which dominates the narrative about projects and their management.

While phrasing their criticism as a matter of poor project performance, Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius et al. (2003) do in fact focus on the poor decision making prior to a society's or a client's commitment to a project. They posit that to foster such commitment the decision premises are often consciously manipulated by inflating the benefits and underestimating the costs of a project. That leads to poor investment decisions, in terms of economic efficiency as well as ethics and democratic values.

Without the client's or some other funder's decision to commit to the project, there would be no project to manage, observe and criticize. In many ways, such decisions, and the premises on which they are made, set the scene and define the conditions for the project implementation. But needless to say, they do not *determine* the subsequent project process. The multiple and dynamic contexts of the project will create additional conditions which co-determine the content and character of the tasks to be accomplished (Kreiner 1995). To Flyvbjerg and his colleagues, the knowledge *that* cost overruns are ubiquitous suffices, while knowledge about the specific causes of such overrun is superfluous. Surprisingly, we can understand and combat cost overruns without understanding the things that drive costs. I will take another position. It is my claim that we cannot understand success without focusing on both the characteristics of the decision to commit to projects *and* the characteristics of the processes that the project guides and makes meaningful.

Before I can develop the implications of this position further, a brief account of the project idea and challenges will be in place.

The idea and challenges of a project

There is no reason to expect that it is easier to define a project than to define an organization (March and Simon 1993). But there are ways of seeing and talking about projects that will reveal characteristics and tensions that enable us to understand the nature of the success of a project.

To begin, projects imply *projecting* oneself, an organization, a society or some other type of entity into a future situation. It is by imagining such future situations as already a reality that we may 'look back' and imagine the steps that will have taken us there (Schutz 1973; Clegg, Pitsis et al. 2006). Imagining such future states of affairs to be real is clearly different from actually producing them. The relation between the projection and the actual action is one of *guidance* through *in-order-to motives* and sensemaking, but the production of future states through action is a process of *filling in empty horizons* (Schutz 1973) with all that uncertainty and unpredictability that this implies (Kreiner and Winch 2008; Winch and Kreiner 2011).

The projected future, the imagined desirable aim or purpose, forms a 'course of action' (Ryle 2000). Such a course allows many different things to be done, but it equips such action with a specific meaning and significance. The same situation will afford different action depending on which 'course of action' is invoked, and the reaction by others will depend on their attribution of one out of many alternative 'courses of action' to the actor.

Secondly, formal projects (in contrast to mental projects discussed above) are organized, consciously and skillfully designed. The projection of a future state of affairs is operationalized in terms of project goals and performance targets. The project design is not only offering action a meaning; it also specifies such action in time and space. Specs, deliverables, schedules, budgets, etc. are inseparable elements of projects. They are necessary additions to the projections because the complexity of the task requires extensive social *delegation*. A project is also a work break-down structure which is superimposed on a social structure. Work packages can be subcontracted,

management procedures established, performance parameters defined, processes planned and coordinated, and prices calculated and negotiated.

This formalization and organization of the project has more than one explanation. It enables the decomposition of the complex task into constituent work packages; it gives the project an identity about which we can communicate and to which resources and responsibility can be allocated, and it facilities the decision of commitment on the part of the client and/or other interested parties. But whatever its explanation, complex and formal projects are systems of *designed and planned* action.

While the projection part of projects gives perspective, meaning and guidance to whatever action subsequent situations may call for, the design and planning part predetermines such action on the basis of a definition of the *future situations* the project will face. When experience proves such definitions wrong, the double-binding of the process causes a schism. Given the scope, scale and duration of the project, contingencies are likely to emerge and they will present themselves as situations when the planned action will be impossible or meaningless to implement, and/or when what makes sense to do in view of the projected aim or purpose violates obligations and contracts. Thus, *a project harbors a latent schism between meaning and plan, between the 'course of action' and the delegation of tasks*.

When this schism becomes manifest, the handling of the contingency will dramatize "the gap between living forward with flawed foresight and understanding backward with equally flawed but mischievously seductive hindsight" (Weick 1999, p. 134). The extension of a project in time and space will offer participants and external stakeholders multiple ways of learning about the nature of the tasks and the actual premises for achieving them (Rittel and Webber 1973). Experienced contingencies are commonly too complex to facilitate rational learning (March and Sutton 1999), were it not for hindsight. All the things that made the foresight flawed appear, in hindsight, to have been knowable all along, in principle as well as in practice. Any deviation from the plan will reflect poor planning and/or poor implementation of the plans. Learning is unsettling the project organization (Weick and Westley 1996) and the need to learn is a sign in itself of a dubious and failed project plan.

The project of success

This article posits that the schism between projection and planning is fundamental to projects, and that the handling of this schism must be central to project success. Since apparently success is seldom, there may be a need for a new perspective on this dilemma. Below I will analyze a successful project in order to learn more about the nature of the schism and the possible strategies for handling it.

In dictionary terms, success is "the accomplishment of an aim or purpose" (The New Oxford Dictionary of English 2001). Project success is accomplishing what we set out to accomplish. But if the schism between projecting and planning is reel, we set out to accomplish more than one thing.

We set out to *implement the project*, i.e. to produce specified results within specific temporal and financial constraints. We also set out to make the projection into the future of some desired state of affairs *come true*, i.e. to fulfill the aim or purpose that makes the results worthwhile and desirable to strive for.

To handle this schism in a world which does not recognize its existence is a project in its own right.

Plan of the article

In the following section I will briefly review and discuss the literature on project success. It can be done briefly because success, as already mentioned, is given cursory attention. Typically assumed to be synonymous with effective project implementation, apparently success deserves no separate discussion. But in view of my aim of making the concept discussable by focusing on the schism between projections and planning I will seek inspiration from other types of literature in which success is discussed.

A case study of a notoriously successful building project is provided. The analysis reveals characteristics of this project which would not likely be attributed from the success itself. The building of mutual confidence and trust in spite of series of contingencies, possibly even because of such contingencies, played a major role in the creation of consensus around the successfulness of the project.

In the final discussion, I will address the poor track record of project management and give another version of the calamitous history of project management research. The crisis may not be a crisis of project performance as much as the crisis of the modernist culture that has such a stronghold in even critical studies of projects.

THE LITERATURE

We return to Pinto (1988) and his early criticism of the lack of conceptual development of project success. He introduced a distinction between project 'internal' and project 'external' measures of success. Both measures are important, but they are related differently to project implementation.

> *[The] dominant school of thought in much of the project management field has been to regard project success as something of an 'internal' measure; that is, to assess whether the project organization was able to get the project completed on time and within performance standards. In fact, assessments of project success may be as much an external consideration as they are internal. Project organizations need to be aware of their responsibility in ensuring project success well after the project has been transferred to the client organization.* (Pinto 1988, p. 69)

Thus, the external considerations take us back to the original projection into the future of some desired state of affairs, i.e. the purpose of the project in the first place, or in Pinto's own words, "the impact of the project upon its intended users, the client" (p. 70). Such measures and considerations are contrasted to the ordinary success criteria developed in the process of

formalizing, designing, planning and organizing the project, i.e. the performance standards, budget and schedule.

Pinto never explicates how the internal and external success criteria interact. But he does challenge us to think of success within a dual time perspective. The internal measures are historical, a comparison of actual performance with the previous plans and specifications; the external considerations are prospective, an assessment of the future impact of the project results on the client. Being future oriented, these impacts are potentialities, hard to claim in a convincing and authoritative manner. They do not have the character of a measure; they are more akin to a narration. The lesser role they play may possibly be explained by their inherent vagueness in comparison with the operational performance measurements on the internal criteria of success. But importantly, this discussion suggests that there may be a difference between *being seen* to be successful on internal measures of success, and *being* successful in a large picture. What such *'being'* successful might possibly entail I discuss next.

The anomia of success

What happens when only internal measures of success are used, as Pinto criticized the dominant school of thought for having done? Cohen (1972) suggests that the answer is *anomia*. Cohen is far from the project management field, but his terminology may be instructive. He uses the notion of 'external' as something culturally imposed and evaluated. The achievement of wealth, power and career is socially recognized as success, but is not necessarily *experienced* as such.

> *The 'culturally evaluated' success is often based on externals: the getting of money and such, but the deeper pleasures of self-fulfillment are often neglected* (Cohen 1972, p. 333)

If Cohen were to criticize the dominant school of thought in project management he would probably point to the ways in which it advocates and institutionally legitimizes people to chase results which will leave them in "the confused, lonely state of mind of the unattached individual" (p.329). 'Being' successful means '*feeling*' successful, and such feelings depend on more things than merely satisfying the expectations of other. Referring to Robert Merton and Robert MacIver, Cohen posits that the outer success may come with a loss of a social *gemeinschaft* and a sense of meaning, aim, purpose or direction. Worst of all, it leads to a break-down of norms and social standards when external success is pursued one-sidedly without respect for current and future impacts on oneself and others. What is lost is a shared sense of

> *'what goes and what does not go, of what is justly allowed by way of behavior and of what is justly prohibited, of what may be legitimately expected of people in the course of social interaction'* (Robert Merton, quoted in Cohen 1972, p. 329).

Translating these ideas to the field of project management, we recognize the fact that there are strong social and contractual incentives for the individuals to satisfy their formal success criteria, all of which relate to the internal performance requirements. But achieving this task may not be experienced as a success if, for instance, the contribution is known to be worthless to the client or

to society. In the struggle for complying with formal requirements, the larger picture will easily be neglected, and the collective task may no longer be the reference point. When that happens, the likelihood that the project as a whole will even meet its performance targets is reduced.

'Getting one's own job done' without consideration for the implications for and impacts on others, may signal such a state of anomia. To regain a sense of meaning and belonging, investments in the larger picture and in the *gemeinschaft* of the project seem necessary.

Investments and the animal spirits

What determines people's willingness to invest, in our case in the collective task and the social gemeinschaft of the project? An element may be what Keynes (2008 [1936]) in another context referred to as "animal spirits".

Keynes used the concept of animal spirits to show the inadequacy of economic calculations for investment decisions. Since it is all about the future, we lack the basis for calculation future benefits, even if conceived in probability terms. A decision to invest, or any other type of action, depends instead on "spontaneous optimism", on putting aside the "thought of ultimate loss".

> *Thus if the animal spirits are dimmed and the spontaneous optimism falters, leaving us to depend on nothing but a mathematical expectation, enterprise will fade and die; - though fears of loss may have a basis no more reasonable than hopes of profit had before* (Keynes 2008 [1936], p. 105)

As Akerlof and Shiller (2009) remind us, "… the word *animal* means 'of the mind' or 'animating.' It refers to a basic mental energy and life force" (p. 3). In their discussion of how "hopes for profit" may mentally eliminate "fears of loss" Akerlof and Shiller refer to aspects such as 'confidence' and 'trust', ' 'fairness', the awareness of a 'temptation towards corrupt and antisocial behavior' and 'driving stories of who we are and what we are doing' (Chapter 1-5). Space prevents a full discussion of these aspects, but we may still take inspiration from them in the form that in many ways *trust*, in the future and in each other, may be a central and constantly contested foundation for effective social action.

What Cohen referred to as anomia may also be related to the loss of animal spirits. If the "spontaneous optimism falters", the project participants may give in to the temptation towards antisocial behavior (Akerlof and Shiller 2009) and look after their own interests only. Performance will falter correspondingly. There will be less to feel successful about, and it is less likely that what is actually achieved will feel right and fulfilling to the "mind of the unattached individual."

Fundamental attribution error

The unproductive implications, the normlessness and the loss of a sense of *gemeinschaft*, as well as the faltering of the spontaneous optimism, will probably never be consciously desired consequences. If they are common results anyway, they are likely to be unforeseen and unwitting side-effects of the project participants' action and interaction at various points during the

implementation of the project. Such action and interaction is presumably determined by their constant "reading" of situations and of each other. Any contingency may be interpreted in multiple ways, and the attribution of motives and responsibilities for the contingency will determine the handling of the situation.

For analytical purposes, we may reduce the alternative readings of the contingency to only two alternatives. The contingency can be read to reflect the attitudes, efforts and competences of the responsible actor, or to reflect the nature of the task and the situational constraints. The reaction to the situation will be shaped by the choice of reading, and the further reactions to this initial reaction will initiate a recursive process of building or deteriorating social relationships in the project, depending on the experienced fairness of the reading of the situation and the implied attribution of motives and other individual traits.

What determines our attribution of motives and intentions to actors that we collaborate with in a project? From social psychology we know that such attributions are often biased. The "fundamental attribution error" refers to a pervasive human tendency

> *… to overestimate personality or dispositional causes of behavior and to underestimate the influence of situational constraints on behavior* (Tetlock 1985, p. 227).

Translated to the field of project management, a similar 'fundamental attribution error' would reflect a tendency to find explanations of deviations from the plan in the implementation of the project itself and to fault the participants for the problem. Such a tendency is not difficult to illustrate. For example, as quoted above Financial Times explained the reported fiasco of major IT/IS projects with "basic project errors" and a "need for greater professionalism in project management" (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006, p. 7). They convincingly infer that errors were made and that management lacked professionalism because had no error been made and had the management been professional the project would have achieved its aim and purpose.

Presumably, the reading of any contingency will be based on judgment, the contingency itself being ambiguous. Of course, contingencies are not always due to the complexity of the task and the situational constraints. But sometimes they are (Kreiner 1995; Rittel and Webber 1973). When that is the case and the contingency is nonetheless blamed on the lack of effort or professionalism of the individual actors, such attributions will be experienced as unfair. Then the spontaneous optimism may falter and the social norms of collaboration deteriorate.

Conclusion

The dominant school of thought in project management guides people to seek success by complying with the planned and agreed target of the project and its constituent work packages. Even if such compliance is achieved, the costs of such achievement may be the costs of anomia, including the lack of meaning and normlessness. Such consequences will rob any achievement of a

sense of successfulness. They will also rob the participants of their animal spirits that enable them to trust and invest in the future success of the project as a collective 'course of action'.

Such project trajectories seem to be common, even characteristic according to Flyvbjerg and others. But of course, they are not inevitable. I will propose to consider the handling of contingencies in project as a critical moment, a tipping point. The way such unfortunate and unforeseen problems are handled will determine in which direction the *gemeinschaft* and the collective effort will develop. The 'fundamental attribution error' may explain why such contingencies may move projects towards failure more often than towards success. A negative spiral may be set in motion by the unfair attribution of a lack of good intentions and professionalism, when in fact the complexity of the task and the inherent flaws of foresight may be the villain.

To make project success a possible outcome it is hypothesized that social checks on the fundamental attribution error (Tetlock 1985) would be instrumental. In the case study below I analyze the governance structure and the interactional patterns in a demonstratively successful project with a view to the challenge of protecting and reviving the spontaneous optimism (animal spirits) on which the eventual collective achievements of the project seem fundamentally to depend.

METHODOLOGY

The rest of this article builds on a case study of a successful construction project. The aim of the study was to understand in which sense it was successful and what made it successful.

Being bounded in time and task, projects are easily recognized as cases and lend themselves to be studied as such. However, rather than rationalizing the choice of method, e.g. along the lines of Yin (1984), I will briefly explore the implications of such a choice. But first, I will describe how the case study was conducted.

Data

This case study is the result of a larger study of successful projects conducted in the context of the Center for Management Studies of the Building Process (see www.clibyg.org).[i] In informal interaction with the field we solicited leads to projects which by common agreement were considered successful. To be included in the sample, we insisted on unanimous assessments, i.e. everybody (including the client, the users, the architects and engineers, the contractors and external stakeholders) should claim the project to have been successful. We ended up selecting five such cases and made a retrospective study of their processes and achievements. We made interviews with the central actors, made site visits to the buildings in use, and collected and analyzed written material about the design and organization of these building projects.

The aim of the data collection was to be able to document the characteristics of such successful projects. Rather than deducing such characteristics from the successfulness of the projects we allowed ourselves to be surprised by the empirical variability. We now know that projects can be successful without complying with the schedules, the budget and the performance specifications.

The force of the example

If case study methodology celebrates the uniqueness of the chosen case; and if knowledge to some extent must build on generalizations; what claims to knowledge can be made from a case study?

The uniqueness comes from the fact that "…context is not noise disguising reality but reality itself" (Burawoy 1998, p. 13). It should not be controlled; it should be studied and understood in terms of its empirical distinctiveness. But what knowledge can be gained to be translated to other contexts? Certainly, it will not enable us to predict or oblige other projects which will have specific contexts of their own.

In arguing for a central role of case studies in scientific pursuits Flyvbjerg (2011) points to *the force of the example*. Providing a specific and well-documented example of the characteristics of a successful project is valuable if it is treated as an example – an example of what may characterize also other projects with success, without predicting that they will. It is a documentation of empirical variety – and thus a reminder of the loose coupling between formal features (structures and statuses) and 'inner' characteristics (processes and results).

The force of the example, and the value of case studies, is easiest to argue when the problem is not that we know too little about a phenomenon, but that we know too much. In the field of projects, we may know too much from knowing the success or failure of the efforts. The conceptions build into formal and lay theories conceal as much as they reveal. Occasionally, one demonstration will be necessary to disprove current taken-for-granted knowledge. Our studies were driven by the belief that there is more to project success than is currently acknowledged. The research was a search for a 'black swan' of project success (Taleb 2007).

THE CASE: THE-BEST-R&D-FACILITIES-IN-THE-WORLD

The R&D unit of a major producer in the field of electronic devises was housed in a renovated building conveniently located close to the City center. But the company's success had made the unit grow to more than 400 employees, and relocation was inevitable. Relocation was already on the agenda when a suitable building suddenly became available and the company rushed to buy the building in front of other potential buyers. It was a completely new building which was originally designed and built to another high-tech company which never moved in. But while the building in itself was attractive, its location was not. The address was remote and much less

prestigious than the present one. The relocation would require the employees to commute longer and to a place of little glamour. To preempt employee dissatisfaction and exits the management promised to build the "best-R&D-facilities-in-the-World!" The management also decided to relocate quickly, i.e. within little more than half a year, and to invite all employees to participate in the interior design and layout of the facilities. It was publicly stated that funds were available for this ambitious and complicated project.

Below I will describe how this project – in retrospect and in spite of somewhat difficult odds – turned out successfully in the eyes of all interested parties.

Staffing of the Project

To a start, a steering group for the project was created with the corporate HR director in charge. Nobody in the corporate management had prior experience with construction projects. They likely underestimated the complexity of the task since soon they realized that a dedicated project manager had to be appointed. An external consultant with a reputation of being good at managing process, but without prior experience with construction projects, was hired. This project manager, the HR director and the corporate CFO now formed the steering group.

An architect was selected for the project based on a screening and interviews with a number of candidates. Important criteria for the choice were documented collaboration skills and a commitment to the extremely compressed time schedule of the project. A search for an engineer was also conducted, but in the end the engineer who had originally designed the building was chosen for his extensive foreknowledge.

Three main contractors were interviewed for the job by the steering group, the architect and the engineer. Two of them, both large and well-known contractors, refused to commit to the time schedule, arguing that it was unrealistic. The third contractor, who was much smaller and invited on the recommendation of the engineer, acknowledged that the schedule looked unrealistic, but promised to do everything possible. On that commitment, he was awarded the contract.

The Process

In the initial stage, approximately 40 employees were active in defining how the building could be turned into 'the-best-R&D-facilities-in-the World'. This process, along with the selection of the professional project staff, took much longer than anticipated, and soon it became clear that the original time table would not work. The target date was postponed several months, but even then the time pressure was high.

Tempo became a very forceful concern, and initiatives were taken to cut time-consuming governance down to an absolute minimum. Thus, the steering committee authorized the main contractor to perform extra work when appropriate without prior consultation. When tested in practice, the steering committee honored this decision by always granting extra pay for the extra work already done. To ease communication, the architect, the engineer and the main contractor

co-located staff on site. This enabled the contractor to be consulted before design decisions were made. Whenever changes in the scope or content of the work needed approval from the steering committee the members made themselves available on very short notice.

The budget was obviously and explicitly given less priority. Funds had been promised to an ambitious and difficult project, and on a number of occasions additional funds were allocated. The project manager had authority to exceed the budget to some extent, but larger allocations had to be approved by the HR director, an approval that normally was received within an hour! To nobody's surprise, in the end the costs exceeded the original budget significantly.

When the deadline approached and things became really difficult, the main contractor arranged tours of the building site for the project manager, the architect and the engineer. Such site-walks took place early morning a couple of times per week and they allowed the participants to develop a common understanding of the remaining tasks and problems and therefore to enable coordinated local action.

Project Achievements

After an intensive and focused effort the R&D unit could move in on the stipulated date. It was somewhat later than originally envisioned and promised, yet it was still considered a major achievement.

The original commitment to build 'the-best-R&D-facilities-in-the-World' was also a commitment to allocate the necessary funds. We do not know what the expectations concerning total expenditures were. All we know is that additional funds were continuously allocated to the project when requested.

This is not to say that economic constraints were not present. The parties claimed to be very economical in the sense that they repeatedly asked themselves if they would make the changes and spend the money had it been their own house and their own money. Thus, the perceived value (or utility) of proposed changes was disciplining behavior, not the originally approved budget.

In terms of employee commitment, seemingly the best R&D facilities in the World did compensate for the unattractive location of the new domicile. At any rate, only a little more than 2% of the 400 employees left the company in connection with the move.

Expression of Successfulness

The steering committee was very pleased with the process and with the outcomes.

> *… being the first time we collaborated we couldn't have asked for more, that's for sure. It was excellent (the client).*

All parties expressed mutual appreciation; especially the role played by the main contractor was praised by everyone:

> *He has been absolutely unique in this project, primarily due to his personality, his immense experience, his style and his extreme dedication and focus. He is absolutely crucial for the success (project manager).*

It is beyond doubt that everybody involved in this project considered it a great success. When asked to explain how the success was made possible, the following examples of statements supplement the above appreciation of the main contractor.

> *… [The] client, unlike most professional clients in our business, showed an incredible trust in us all. We are not used to have that – they believed in it, and they didn't even ask if we would be done in time (main contractor).*

> *The spirit was good all along, because everybody agreed to the commitment to [achieve the task] in due time. … Everybody was interested in making it … and everybody was enthusiastic about the project (architect).*

Unconventional project management

In many ways, the case project deviated from conventional wisdom about project management. The project was started in a helter-skelter manner without much more bearing than the acute need for a new domicile and a commitment to build 'the-best-R&D-facilities-in-the-World'. The client solicited the services of both designers and contractors on weak contractual ground, relying instead on an assessment of their collaborative skills and commitment to the task. Had the project failed, such unconventional features would have been convincing explanations and points of learning from experience.

Let me highlight two additional examples of unconventionality. First, written communication was forbidden. The client and the main contractor agreed that all grievances and disagreements were to be handled in face-to-face interaction on the construction site. Not even email correspondence was acceptable on any issue that potentially involved a conflict of interests or interpretation. Such practice seems to violate the current belief in governance based on extensive documentation and transparency. Secondly, the main contractor was also the main organizer. Not only did he plan and direct the work of his own responsibility (e.g. by starting early on the site to prepare optimal working conditions for his teams). He also organized the work of the project manager, the architect and the engineer: "… he kept them all on their toes, and he was always prepared" (architect). Such diffusion of authority and initiative seems to violate the current trust in centralization and formalization of duties and responsibilities.

Conclusion

The case indicates that there is a difference between knowing project management and knowing how to manage projects (Green 2006). It may even suggest that knowing project management would prevent the successful management of project. For example, had they known more about

project management they might have focused elsewhere, e.g. on the targets and other performance indicators like the schedule. Instead “they didn’t even ask if we would be done in time”. They might likely have focused on the budget, but instead they authorized people to do what was necessary, and willingly paid the bills afterwards. However, the case study suggests that there exists a different way of thinking about managing projects – a different rationale for how to pursue project success.

ANALYSIS

The aim of the analysis is to learn in what sense this project was successful, and what features and actions might account for such a success. The analysis will be divided into four scenes.

Scene 1: The selection of participants

The staffing of the project has already been described as unconventional, but what makes it significant in understanding project success? Remember that two candidate for the main contractor role were relegated for regarding the schedule to be unrealistic, an assessment which was vindicated by the subsequent course of events. But it was exactly the third one’s commitment to an unrealistic schedule that made him the winner. Trusting that all had the capabilities and capacity to do a good job, what counted was the attitude towards the project task. The acceptance of an unrealistic schedule was symbolic in the sense of signaling not only commitment, but also a “spontaneous optimism” that enabled the main contractor to accept his dependence on the client and project management for achieving success. The selection was not a matter of saving money, but about finding a main contractor that would keep the projection of ‘best-R&D-facilities-in-the-World’ as reference point. Reasoned realism signaled “thoughts of ultimate loss” which would make investments in the collective venture much less likely.

The described selection enabled the project to be designed on the assumption of trust. The design reflected a delegation not only of responsibility, but also of initiative – a delegation that speeded up the process and made the attention to detail possible. These are well-known features in the management of the unexpected (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001).

Scene 2: Symbolic sacrifice of schedule

Although time was a matter of serious concern, the schedule was revised early in the process. The invitation to the users to get involved in the development of their future workplace was successful and therefore took much longer than expected. It was allowed to take longer because the success of the project hinged on the employees’ satisfaction with the process and the outcome. Sacrificing the schedule sent a message that the company and the project management cared about the views and inputs of the users.

Thus, the user involvement made the project finish later, but it also made it less critical that it finished on time. Finishing late became almost a positive gesture, a reminder to everybody of what was important and what not.

Scene 3: Oblique Performance Control

Like sacrificing the schedule had symbolic importance, so had sacrificing the budget. But in neither case did the matters of concern reflected in the project targets lose their saliency. The projection of 'the-best-R&D-facilities-in-the-World' seemed to be of focal attention, but both schedule and budget needed attention in more oblique manners (Kay 2010). The 'cost culture' did not regulate the *additional* spending, but the justification for spending in the first place. Economic discipline was observed by questions like "would you spend the money had it been at home and your own money?" Cost control was not a task for the management but a matter of self-control on the part of the main contractor and the designers. Refusing requests was not an issue, because there were no instances of requests that should be refused.

Controlling the schedule was similarly oblique in many respects. The delegation of initiative and responsibility to contractors and designers empowered them to speed up their ordinary work. Making the management available for fast decisions when such decisions were required further reflected the heed that was paid to the continuous progression of the task accomplishment. The ways in which the main contractor eased the work of his teams accelerated production. Such initiatives enabled the project to progress *as fast as possible* irrespectively of formal schedule and performance target.

Scene 4: The ban of written communication

The previous scenes all underscore the importance of mutual trust between the participants – otherwise e.g. the management would not have dared to delegate the initiative to change plans to the main contractor. But how can we understand the participants maintaining such mutual trust in the face of all the contingencies that required extra spending and extra time? How did they avoid blaming each other for the unforeseen complications of the tasks? Presumably, the idea that contingencies were caused by bad faith and asocial behavior (Akerlof and Shiller 2009) must have crossed their minds. Instead, they operated as if the contingencies were systematically caused by the constraints of the situation and the nature of the task – an observation that challenges us to explain how they avoided the pervasive human tendency of blaming the actor, not the situation. It is in this connection that the ban of written communication becomes significant.

Tetlock (1985) has experimentally shown that if people know *prior* to being exposed to the behavior, that they will be asked to account for their interpretation, they are more likely to take situational constraints into consideration. But Tetlock also showed that if people have first formed their interpretation, being asked to justify it afterwards will not make them relax their tendency to attribute the behavioral outcomes to individual traits. Translated into the context of project management, the importance of the communicative form becomes obvious. Written communication allows an asynchronous process of making sense of the contingencies, i.e. allowing the project management to form opinions about whether the contingency could have been prevented had the contractor acted more conscientiously. If left unchecked, the 'fundamental attribution error' would suggest that such interpretations would prevail. Banning written

communication necessitated the formation of a social context of face-to-face interaction prior to the discussion of the contingencies. That gave in most cases the main contractor the opportunity to explain the problems and to teach the project manager about the nature of the situation and its constraints. Because the project managers did not enter the situation with an already formed opinion they were presumably able to read the contingency situation in a more nuanced manner.

The result was that the interpersonal trust was maintained intact across all these contingencies – as indicated by the participants' testimonials above. The mutually respectful interaction at the tipping points which such contingencies constituted acknowledged not only the inherent uncertainty of the task and the need for continuous learning; it also acknowledged the fact that they mutually depended on each other for doing a good job. Respecting the situational constraints under which others operate may help foster trust, motivation and spontaneous optimism (Weick 2002).

The project of success in practice

All these tactics and solutions in the studied case are specific to this project, but the dilemmas and problems which they address are probably general. The issue of trust as an operational premise, and the maintenance of fairness and mutual respect in the face of contingencies, seems to be the overriding concern. If problem solving must be written, some other way of checking the fundamental attribution error must be invented. Without such checks of one or the other kind, project success will not be feasible.

The project of success starts with a projection of a social *gemeinschaft* into the future, at least until the termination of the project. It continues with a design of the steps that will enable such projection to come true. It is not one set of actions, but multiple sets of action that can be imagined and made sense of from the perspective of the projected state of affairs. The recruitment decisions, the public sacrifice of project targets, and the ban of written problem solving were all sensible in view of the need to maintain trust in the future and in each other in order to reinforce collective norms and behavioral standards. We may easily imagine other types of action that would make sense in a similar way. The specific solution is not the conclusion; the task of finding solutions is!

CONCLUSION: THE PROJECTIFICATION OF PROJECTS

The success of a project is probably best understood as a good feeling about what was done and achieved. It is not independent of the achievements – on all the dimensions that could be used in measuring such achievements – but success depends first and foremost on a certain frame of mind within which such achievements are viewed.

Success being a feeling more than a calculation implies several things. It means that we may see the project as a success by feeling good about what was done and achieved, but we may not really know why. A feeling is probably not analytically decomposable into constituent factors or

elements. As Cohen (1972) showed, we may feel little successful even when we perform well on culturally sanctioned criteria for success. Success on formal criteria will not necessarily evoke the feeling of success, but in justifying the feeling of success to oneself or to others, such success criteria are issues that need to be addressed and interpreted. “People … need to feel in order to discover what it all means,” says Weick (2002). Measurements on formal success criteria will not explain feelings of success, because it is the feelings that determines what such measurements say and mean.

Perhaps the most important justification for the feeling of success in projects is the fact that the feeling is widely shared. Individual feelings of success may often be suspected by others to be rationalizations, e.g. idiosyncratic or self-serving ways of justifying why the formal criteria of success were not met (Beckman and Persson 1979). As such, they can be discarded as fake or strategically misrepresented feelings. It is more difficult (but never impossible) to discard such feelings if they are widely shared across a community with very different interests in the project. In our case study, it would be unreasonable to discard the fact that *inter alia* the client, the project manager, the architect and the main contractor all felt good about what was done and achieved. Their feelings of success were clearly not independent; they were fostered in the shared history of interaction during the execution of the project. They came to agree that what was done was right and what was achieved was good, even if what was done and achieved deviated from the plans and targets to some extent.

I pointed out that such shared feelings about deviations from plans and targets as being right and good are in themselves a deviation from expectations. E.g., how can a client feel good about a budget overrun, or a project manager feel good about a delay? In explaining this, I used a framework adopted from attribution theory (Tetlock 1985). My suggestion was that deviations from plans and targets, as they likely occur regularly in complex projects, could be blamed either on the involved and responsible actors or on the situational factors and the nature of the task. The attribution of blame would determine the reaction to the deviation, but also determine the relationships between the people involved in the project. Furthermore, we know from social psychology that we have a pervasive tendency to “underestimate the influence of situational constraints on behavior” (Tetlock 1985, p. 227). We may even have legal and contractual backup for holding the various participants accountable for various forms of deviation, whether or not what they did was right and only unexpected due to unforeseen situational constraints.

Such misattributions of fault to participants for deviations that more fairly should be attributed to the situation and the nature of the task have two negative implications. First of all, it prevents the participants from dealing with the deviant situation in adequate ways. Assuming *a priori* that individuals are at fault reduces the incentive to explore the nature of the real problems, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will find an adequate way of dealing with the deviation. That has implications for the further achievements. But secondly, it will also influence the social relationships between the involved parties. To be held responsible for effects that lie outside ones

control, and to be blamed for adequately dealing with unforeseen situational constraints, will not likely be seen as fair and right. That in itself will undermine the project *gemeinschaft*, and will guide and motivate further action in the direction of protecting oneself from being blamed rather than completing the task.

Thus, to turn success into a project is to imagine ways of designing and managing the project that will make misattribution of faults less likely. The case study was analyzed to demonstrate that the observed practice could be understood as enabling participants to constructively deal with situational constraints and unforeseen deviations. In a sense, plans and targets were not the main reference for the interaction; the real situation and the possible remedies were. Therefore it is conceivable that they achieved more than what they would otherwise have done had the project been managed traditionally. Whether this achievement was more or less than what they set out to achieve originally, lost relevance in the process.

To turn project success into a feeling, a shared feeling among the participants in the project; and to turn the management challenge of creating success into a matter of checking the "fundamental attribution error" in the face of deviations from plans and target; such ideas will be met with skepticism, in spite of the empirical illustrations. To talk about success as feelings is probably disqualifying in itself, even if I point out that it is *feelings about* the social interaction and collective achievements. Furthermore, to make the *a priori* assumption that the nature of the task prevents us from understanding and thoroughly plan its achievement, violates the fundament of modernism, the trust in "rational design by an omniscient planner" (Kay 2010) (p. 4). No one escapes from the modernists' disdain of uncertainty. Whatever we learn about the nature of the task and the situational constraints could have, and should have, been known in advance and made part of the rational design. While such logic gives us the enjoyment of understanding others through "flawed but mischievously seductive hindsight", it provides no good advice for future success. It is rewarding to be a modernist in a modernist culture, but it is not helpful. We will get recognized and paid for enforcing the culturally enforced criteria of success upon others, but will also unwittingly move the project towards a state of anomie in which – in the end – the achievements are few and the feelings about the process and the achievements are negative. A "just culture" (Dekker 2007) would probably be a more constructive context for project performance than the modernist one.

In conclusion, the real challenge for the future success of project management as a discipline and school of thought is to return to the fundamental schism between the projections and the plans, the ignorance of which may the reason why failure, not success, is the characteristic of projects. The enactment of the modernist presumption that projects are systems of designed and planned action will likely lead failure and anomia. Project success presupposes, on the other hand, a *gemeinschaft* of norms and feelings – a *gemeinschaft* that not only facilitates constructive collaboration, but also facilitates a shared appreciation of the achievements.

The success of projects will regain its crucial importance to effective project implementation (Pinto 1988) only when the project of implementation becomes once again projectified, meaning that the projection part out of the project equation be given more emphasis. Even if projections entail uncertainty and unpredictability, in interaction as well as in achievement, they are essential to, not antithetical to, the success of projects.

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