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# Comments on challenging the rational project environment

## The legacy and impact of Christensen and Kreiner's *Projektlledning i en ofulständig värld*

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – Kristian Kreiner is one of the co-authors of *Projektlledning i en ofulständig värld*. The purpose of this paper (commentary) is to reiterate and update a few of the fundamental tenets on which the original text was based. The purpose is also to argue that the need to challenge conventional project management thinking is still pressing today.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This commentary highlights two ideas and makes one plea for future research.

**Findings** – Project managers must bridge two notions of a project: one focussing on some desired future state which can guide current, contingent action, and the other one focussing on the conscious design and planning of social action to enable efficient, collaborative achievements. In practice, project managers face a dilemma in having to encourage both behavioural flexibility (adaptability) and behavioural rigidity (discipline). Secondly, project managers face conditions of complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Conventionally, such conditions are made to signal poor project management, but they are often managerial premises rather than problematic outcomes.

**Research limitations/implications** – We need to theorize project management under imperfect, but realistic circumstances in which complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity are central. One way to start may be to reject the notion that good project management is equivalent to good planning of processes and responsibilities. Rather, we should search for intelligent ways of using plans which necessarily will be rendered inadequate and imperfect by change and turbulence.

**Originality/value** – The plea delivered in the paper is to change our academic focus from devising optimal ways of planning and organizing projects to a search for more intelligent ways of exploiting plans and organizational forms that are, by definition, inadequate and imperfect.

**Keywords** Organizations, Project management, Project planning, Books, Dilemmas in project management, Imperfect realities as premise, Project as phenomenon, Project as organizational form

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

### Introduction

If our book has become “a literally classic” in project management it is against all odds. It is written in a local, exotic language, and its thinking was – and still is – rather foreign. The fact that it has survived so many years and is still in print may suggest that discordant voices continue to be needed in the globalized language of project management. The book would have become history and out-of-print by now had our ideas been incorporated in the current body of knowledge. But that they have not, is not all bad since the aim of scholarship cannot be to authorize ways of thinking



(including our own), but to stimulate and inspire new ways of thinking. We were lucky to stumble over ideas that apparently resist being incorporated and therefore may continue to inspire.

I like to highlight two ideas on which the book rests. The first one is the tension between the project as phenomenon and form. The other one is the need to “get real” in our thinking about project management. I will briefly explain and elaborate on these ideas.

*The tension between project as phenomenon and form*

The project is commonly defined in terms of formal characteristics. It has goals, boundaries, work break-down structures, participants and specified deliverables, schedules, etc. But a project can also be thought about in other terms, as a phenomenon, which refers to the way in which our thinking about the future influences individual and collective action (Schutz, 1973). In this sense, a project is a “course of action” (Ryle, 2000), i.e. an imagined and desired future state of affairs that informs, but does not determine the steps to be taken in order to reach such a future. If our project is to become a professional project manager there is probably a general set of things that we need to do and read. But the project does not prevent us from doing many other things, and it does not depend on us doing and reading specific things, because its role is to make us do and read whatever we do and read in a specific way. The project equips our action with perspective, meaning, attention to the circumstances and contingencies of the situation, etc. Understood in this way, projects become ways of acting flexibly and spontaneously without losing sense and direction in a constantly unfolding reality. In such realities, situational affordances and constraints are seldom foreseeable and therefore never entirely a result of our planning or control.

On the other hand, the project has become institutionalized in such a way that predictability of future action is of utmost importance. Realistic plans and cost estimates allow stakeholders to make rational decision about engaging in the project. Whether such plans and predictions will suffice in realizing the project goal depends on the unfolding of events in the future in which the project is functionally and legitimately entangled. When the situation prevents the project from performing according to plan, or when the planned action does not make sense as a step in a projected “course of action”, a tension will become noticeable.

The book addressed this tension in somewhat different words and without resolving it, of course. Achieving desired goals flexibly in unfolding realities, and implementing prior plans, are both important aspects of the project manager’s work. But often they oblige him or her to do incompatible things. In ignoring this dilemma we have, generally speaking, become liable of taking the plans literally, sacrificing the flexible enactment of plans that the project authorizes. We did not advocate the sacrifice of plans, either. We only advocated that we take this dilemma seriously.

*Get real!*

There are cultural incentives for taking project designs, i.e. the formal goals, the specific plans, etc. literally:

The hope that rational design by an omniscient planner could supersede practical knowledge derived from a process of adaptation and discovery swept across many fields in the course of the twentieth century. This approach was generally described as modernism (Kay, 2010, p. 4).

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Such hopes have definitely also swept across the field of project management. They have misguided managerial effort and biased experiential learning in relation to projects. E.g. when project goals are not met within prior specified time and budgetary constraints, it is taken as the sign of a weakness of will and skill, implying that the project would have succeeded had the design and planning been done professionally and then implemented literally. The complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity witnessed in practice should have, and could have been taken into account in the planning of the project (Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2003).

Our book was inspired by the observation that such learning has proven futile. Complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity are still ubiquitous features of project work. In formal terms, successful projects are rare events and professional project management far apart. But maybe we would learn something more helpful if we acknowledged the complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity as the conditions under which project management is performed. The task of management is not to eradicate complexity as much as to cope with it in the pursuit of the project goal. And for that task, many of the traditional managerial tools and strategies are ineffective and inadequate, if not directly harmful. The book's heretic commandments suggested the need for more subtle and aesthetic forms of project management in a world torn between the symbolism of a modernist culture and the practical requirements of achieving a task under highly imperfect conditions.

### The future

Over the years, the book has been accused of discrediting project planning. This was not the intention. We only wanted to iterate the limited control plans have over the unfolding of events and processes in practice. We believe in planning as a way of preparing for and meeting reality (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001), but we also believe that it is detrimental to individual and collective achievements to mistake the plan for reality (Weick and Teece, 1987; Weick, 1990; Kay, 2011). Rather than more planning, we need to develop skills for using project plans in more inspired and realistic ways. The mechanical projections of goals into the future, the mechanical ways of implementing project plans, and the mechanical ways of evaluating and learning retrospectively are essential problems still masquerading as solutions. While awaiting the necessary institutional and cultural changes we need to study and theorize the luck, the ingenuity and the bravery it takes to cope successfully with the dilemmas of project management.

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#### **About the author**

Kristian Kreiner is Professor at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. His research is currently focussed on construction projects and on an ethnographic mapping of critical phases of such projects, e.g. architectural competitions and the work on construction sites. His theoretical interests are broad, spanning from project management, over organization theory and to social theory in general. Kristian Kreiner can be contacted at: [kk.ioa@cbs.dk](mailto:kk.ioa@cbs.dk)

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