Part 1

Constructing Project Management

Its history constructed

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Introduction to Part 1

Part 1 is a description of how the elements of what we call project management evolved over many years, but particularly since the early 1950s, and were slowly constructed into the thing that most project managers would recognise by the term today.

It is not an account of the management of projects through history; such a thing would be huge and probably meaningless. It does not claim – indeed it positively challenges the notion – that project and program management is now all defined and textbook clear. It shows rather that there are points of divergence and contradiction in the way we describe it and present our knowledge of it.

Some argue that such pluralism of knowledge is no bad thing since it shows vigour and reflects widespread adoption under differing conditions[1]. Maybe. Such a thought is at least comforting. But it doesn't diminish the concern where one believes misperceptions or mistakes are being propagated.

It is not the intent of this first section of the book to enter into any real or detailed critical discussion of the theory of the subject. This will be more the aim of Parts 2 and 3. It is instead intended as a description of the major actions that have contributed to the development of what passes for the discipline: an account of the major insights which slowly have built up our knowledge of the domain.

Historical Method

In presenting this chronology, I have endeavoured to be scholarly, respecting original texts (though admittedly much of the source material is secondary) and reflecting the thinking of the actors of the time and the contexts in which they were operating.

All historians face the twin challenges of how to choose – how to frame – the object to be investigated, and then how to evaluate the data that are available and relevant. Scholarship requires absolute respect for the data, rigour and lucidity of analysis, and clarity of exposition. But judging relevance is not a value-independent exercise: it reflects a perspective. History today is rarely seen as an objective, disinterested enquiry but rather as socially constructed. My personal concern is how best to manage projects but critically *my unit of analysis is the project, not management processes and practices*. So I look for examples of how projects were, or were not, successfully managed. My history is thus different in scope and purpose from much of the more traditional project management preoccupation with planning and control.

The trouble is, the field is vast. Selecting events to illustrate the evolution of the discipline and, to a degree, in describing them, will inevitably reflect my own views, despite the desire for objectivity. But contemporary history acknowledges this: we are long past the time when we claimed that history was based on hard facts from which 'objective' truth was inductively drawn. Historians create historical facts, as the eminent historian E.H. Carr put it, according to their interests – feminism, gender, poverty, Marxism, colonialism, etc.[2] Study the historian to understand the history.

Bespeaking Relevant Knowledge

The examples I have chosen reflect major learning cases: one extraterrestrial (the Apollo Moon program); some international (Concorde); some national but private sector (the Andrew North Sea oil project); and others public (the US Department of Defense programs or the UK 'New Accommodation Program' (NAP) – the relocation of the UK's intelligence services). Were I say German, Japanese, Brazilian or Ghanaian, to pick a few nationalities at random, my examples would doubtless be different. Apollo would figure, though I am not so sure about the others. But I am not. I am an English academic with a strong practitioner bias who has spent a lot of time working in the Americas, Europe and the Middle East, and who believes passionately that there are things one can say about good practice in managing projects and programs.

And I also recognise the importance of context. Management, as we noted in the Introduction and as we shall see reiterated often, as a subject is inherently contextual[3]. One of the very strong aims of Part 1 is to illustrate this, showing how different contexts create the need for different management responses.

Aristotle said the mark of an educated man is to recognize in every field as much certainty as the nature of the matter allows. Context and personal perspectives shield us from ever attaining pure truth, be this historical or operational. Pure, whole truth is, in the social sciences, epistemologically impossible given the types of knowledge potentially in play and the effect of context, topics we shall discuss in Part 3.

Practising project and program managers must therefore shape their own version of 'what we need to know to manage projects effectively'. Part 1 is presented in the belief that reading a chronological account of how the project and program body of knowledge came into being will provide a foundation to help do this.

So, read and reflect; evaluate and adjust; modify and apply! Conjure your own account of what has made project management what it is. Most importantly, ask yourself, what in fact it – this knowledge – is.

References and Endnotes

[1] Söderlund, J. (2011), Theoretical foundations of project management, in: Morris, P. W. G., Pinto, J. K. and Söderlund, J. (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of project management*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, pp. 37–42.

[2] Carr, E. H. (1961), *What is history?* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

[3] Griseri, P. (2002), *Management knowledge: A critical view*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke.