

# Managing project culture: The case of Environ Megaproject

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## Abstract

This paper explores the development of the project culture of Environ Megaproject during the project life cycle. Project cultures run the risk of becoming dysfunctional in transition to a new project phase. The findings indicate the presence of two dominant cultural episodes. During the episode of the Gideon's gang (1996–2001) innovative and entrepreneurial value orientations were dominant. An intervention imposed from outside the project organization introduced new value orientations of control and accountability. During the episode of the Diplomats (2001–2004) these new value orientations replaced the former project culture. The research findings suggest the necessity of project managers and project performing organizations to reflect upon the development of the project culture during the project life cycle.

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*Keywords:* Megaproject; Project culture; Cultural change; Project phase

## 1. Introduction

Mega-projects in the construction of infrastructure are becoming more and more popular with national governments. It is the scale, complexity, number of partners, and duration that distinguish mega-projects from traditional projects. These project-based alliances constitute hybrid organizations that combine features of conventional hierarchical management with those of networks [1]. In addition, many mega-projects are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, as well as a mixture of joint organization and sub-contracting of elements of the workflow to legally separate partners, which, together, make for a high degree of complexity [2]. Flyvbjerg et al. [3,4] highlights a mega-project paradox in that the growth of mega-projects continues despite the poor performance record of many of these projects.

Although the societal impact of large-scale construction projects ('mega-projects') is enormous, academic interest in this subject has been modest and has mainly focused on

themes related to the rational organization and (political) control in terms of policy programs, contracting, perceived outcomes, and especially risk and economic failure [1–5]. A 'top-down' conception still dominates in which complexity is located in the domain of policy formulation (development and design), and that project organizations (construct) are situated in a social environment in which work-related goals and activities are clear and can be (fully) predicted, political backing is stable, there are no resisting single-issue groups and no internal conflicts which lame the project [6]. Research on megaprojects, in particularly as explanatory factors for project failure or success, focus on stakeholder analyses and macro financial analysis (e.g. [1,3–5]).

Megaprojects can be adequately understood and interpreted in their (self)organizing condition from a cultural perspective on their development. Henrie and Sousa-Poza [7] looked at the state of research within leading project management academic level journals and project management books and concluded that attention for a culture perspective on project management has increased significant last decade. It is now widely recognized that national cultures of alliance partners, professional cultures, and project cultures influences the realization of projects goals (e.g. [8–16]).

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This paper explores the case of the Environ Megaproject from a cultural perspective.<sup>1</sup> This multi-billion Euro project is one of the largest and most ambitious infrastructural projects in Otherland. A number of arguments make this case interesting to study. In the first place, the project is a Public Private Partnership in which a complex network of public and private organizations cooperate under the supervision of the Environ Megaproject organization. In the second place, the independent project organization developed a clearly distinctive culture over time. In the third place, the project had to be highly flexible and adaptable due to innovative technologies, unsure outcomes, and a dynamic context. Finally, the project attracted much public and political attention due to a parliamentary enquiry on costs overrun and time delays. The first part of this paper explores a cultural perspective on project management. The second part focuses on cultural change in projects. The third part discusses the research methodology used. The fourth part introduces the case of the Environ Megaproject and presents the findings. The fifth part gives the main implications of the research findings for project managers and project performing organizations. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

## 2. A cultural perspective on project management

For 25 years now, organizational culture has been one of the main themes for scholars and managers [17–19]. The dominant body of literature on organizational culture in leading project management academic level journals and project management books is generally instrumental and focused at shared cultural values (e.g. [7,11,12,20]). The PMBOK Guide, for example, states that culture is the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought [21]. This is what Martin [22] calls an integrative perspective on organization culture. Conflicts, power, subcultures and ambiguity have no place in this integrative perspective on organizational culture [22–24].

I agree with Henri and Souza-Poza [7] who state that project managers (and scientists) should also look outside project management literature for information on project culture as the integrative perspective on organization culture gave rise to much academic discussion (e.g. [22–25]). The concept of culture that has been used in the integrative perspective is far too simple [25]. Van Maanen and Barley [26] were among the first to stress different subcultures in organizations. The instrumental and functional character of culture with its emphasis on cultural systems are criticized. Therefore, in contrast to the general perception of organizations *having* a culture, organizations have to be perceived *as* cultures [27]. In this “root” metaphor, organizations are modern tribes with artifacts, practices, values,

multiple cultures, power relations, conflicts, and abnormalities [22]. The interpretative perspective has increasingly received attention in organizational studies (e.g. [28–30]).

Deviations, failures, and risks of many mega-projects in terms of timescale and costs pushes the attention in project management literature away from instrumental, structural modes and towards issues of social interaction, reproduction, sense making, and organizational culture (e.g. [2–5,30–32]). Hasting [10], for example, stated that increasingly new projects will be based on informal, boundary spanning networks. Furthermore, Kendra and Taplin [15] noted that a project culture consists of multiple fragmented subcultures. Such an interpretative perspective focuses at processes of meaning, sense making and social construction of culture by actors and come to a ‘*verstehen*’ of the constructed social reality [33,34]. Mega-projects are considered to be the object and outcome of social interactions as much as any other forms of organizing within a multiple context of socially interdependent networks.

In this study the “root” metaphor of project as culture is applied. Martin [22] uses three classifications to describe organizational culture as a phenomenon. The first classification analyze content themes which consists of espoused and inferred cultural values orientations. The second classification map the formal and informal practices such as (unwritten) rules, procedure, and management styles. Finally, the third classification analyze cultural forms which describes the physical arrangements, stories, rituals, humor, myths, and heroes.

## 3. Cultural strategies of change

In a sample of 34 Canadian companies, professional project managers concluded that project cultures are not stable but are constantly changing and that there is a need to effectively manage change [35]. Megaprojects run the risk of developing a, what Bate [27] calls, dysfunctional culture. In this stage the project is caught in a vicious circle of growing frustration, increasing isolation, losing innovativeness, and decreasing ability to adapt to the changes in the wider environment. Based upon a study of 202 organizations Kotter and Heskett [36] came to the conclusion that successful organizational cultures are highly adaptive to changes in environments.

Two types of change can be distinguished; evolutionary or continuous change and revolutionary or interventional change [27,37]. Continuous change takes places during the life cycle of a project while revolutionary change implies a transform of project culture. A static perspective on transformation, a low capacity of self reflectivity, an orientation on the inner organization, and no experience with market orientation, decrease the possibility of continuous change. If this is the case, interventions from outside are needed to transform the project culture. Different strategies for cultural change can be implied; empirical–rational strategies, normative–reeducative strategies and power-coercive strategies [37]. An example of normative–reeducative

<sup>1</sup> The name is a pseudonym for a very large European multi-billion Euro project in Otherland, designed to improve the accessibility of the coastal area. All partners involved in the project have been renamed.

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