



Managing soft change projects in the public sector

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Abstract

Public sector organisations worldwide are under pressure to increase efficiency while delivering improved and integrated services. Governments are promoting adoption of project-based management and use of formal project management methodologies developed in the context of essentially hard projects in industries where goals and methods are well defined. Problems in applying hard project management practice to the business of government and, in particular, to soft projects such as organisational change, challenge current project management standards and practices. Some writers and researchers have turned to soft systems thinking for enlightenment. They have identified possible links between project management practice and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). However, examples of reported practical application have been few and limited in scope. This paper reports on the outcome of a team of practitioner-researchers' attempts to link SSM and project management practice, in several public sector agencies in Australia. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd and IPMA. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Public sector organisations worldwide are under pressure to increase efficiency while delivering improved and integrated services. New public management (NPM), a trend for reform based on new business management models, is driving public sector responses and bringing with it innovative ways of conceptualising and communicating organisational change [1]. In New South Wales (NSW), Australia, whole-of-government reform initiatives for public sector services aim to leverage the benefits of global business environments through new technology within a framework of fiscal responsibility and accountability [2].

The NPM environment is characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity and stakeholder management issues that are multifaceted and complex. Here, strategic management requires new conceptual frameworks that involve a shift from formal models and centralised direction to contingent and 'emergent' conceptions [1]. Central to an organisation's capacity to respond is

building and embedding a strategic capability, key elements being sharing vision, challenging prevailing models and fostering systemic thinking. In practice, these strategies are translating into changing organisational structures, capabilities, culture and processes.

2. Project management in the new public management environment

Concurrent with developments in NPM, governments have been promoting the use of project management. No single formal project management framework is recommended in NSW, however, there are guidelines for practitioners managing and planning information technology adoption, including a project management guideline [3].

Underpinning formal project management methods are industry standards such as the (USA) Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge [4], the (UK) Association for Project Management Body of Knowledge [5], IPMA's Competence Baseline (ICB) [6] and, in Australia, the National Competency Standards for Project Management [7]. All have grown out of essentially top-down command and control views of organisations and management, involving a focus on single

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projects with tangible physical end products at a single location.

In 1996 Partington [8] found comparatively little attention, particularly in the form of empirical research, was being given to organisational change projects. There seems no evidence in the general project management literature that this has substantially changed. In 2000, Stretton [9] concluded “the project management literature has surprisingly little material on organisational change processes, and certainly no universally accepted guidelines for undertaking organisational changes as projects”.

Two general views about organisational change appear to be emerging. The first (top-down) follows a rational, hierarchical model that emphasises control and is expressed through formal structures and systems. Its language acts to superimpose a logic, order and structure on an otherwise irrational social process [10]. Despite evidence that the language of implied control frequently does not work in NPM environments, top-down models are persisting in practice. This has been partly attributed to managers who, despite rhetoric to the contrary, may feel threatened by new organisational structures and processes [8].

Increasing support is being reported for emerging (bottom-up) models that recognise a non-linear, political and irrational process. Associated organisational forms may be characterised as dynamic and fragmented, yet interconnected, composed of competing perspectives and interests and supported by informal systems. While the emerging language associated with bottom-up models is challenging the conventional vocabulary of organisational change, it is yet to support a consistent framework for conceptualising action [10].

3. Theory and practice in project management

Growing interest in the management of complex projects is driving calls for new project management paradigms [11]. Nevertheless, the focus remains upon the technical aspects of project management and successful management of individual projects [8].

Reviewing the *International Journal of Project Management*'s first 10 years, Betts and Lansley found project management quite well defined but few published papers contributing to its development by building and testing models and theories. They concluded, “these papers reflect a field that is very practice based, and concerned with the integration of information and experiences rather than being highly analytical or theoretical” [12]. Partington [8] reached a similar conclusion about the *Project Management Journal*. Later reviews confirm the concentration in leading journals on “classical” problems of project execution [13]. This perspective is reflected in project management research where,

according to Urli and Urli [14] researchers do not see a field bubbling with new ideas. Rather, they see an area using concepts already developed or refinements of current concepts.

4. Hard and soft projects

Systems analysis and systems engineering provided the conceptual basis for development of traditional project management concepts, procedures and techniques [15]. Fundamental to discussion about developing capability to manage organisational change projects in complex NPM environments is the distinction that can be made between hard and soft projects.

The hard systems worldview underpins many traditional definitions of projects. These proceed from an assumption that the objectives of a project, and the methods of achieving them, are well understood throughout the project. In practice this has been found inadequate for dealing with ill-structured, real world problems where defining clear objectives and formulating viable alternatives can be problematic. In these cases, Yeo argues for a soft systems approach, specifically Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) [15].

While there is no consistent definition of hard or soft as variously applied to projects, methods or measures in the project management literature, their use generally reflects the distinction made in the systems field. In reviewing the history of systems thinking, Midgley [16] identifies hard and soft as distinct movements. In the hard paradigm it is assumed that goals and methods are already well defined. The problem is then how to find the best solution, however ‘best’ is defined and measured. Systems are seen to relate to functions that can be quantified and controlled, or made more efficient, while organisations are viewed as machine-like structures, populated by essentially predictable and interchangeable people.

The soft paradigm view is that the aspects of a situation that cause it to be problematic are not easily defined or isolated. To increase understanding about the situation, it is necessary to engage with people at a qualitative level. People are seen as individuals, with their own culture and continually developing and refining their views of the real world situation in which they are taking action. Hence it is unlikely that there will be one ‘best’ solution [17]. Instead, there will be many possibilities for action, each valued differently by different stakeholders.

A starting point for distinguishing between hard and soft projects is Turner and Cochrane's [18] goals-and-methods matrix. This classifies projects into four types according to the level of definition of goals and methods of achieving them. An inherent assumption behind common project management techniques, however, is that all projects within a program are fundamentally homogeneous.

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