

## Advances in Project Management Series<sup>1</sup>

### Sustainability and Success

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Many articles and conference presentations touch on the notion of project failure, promising to improve on past statistics. Indeed, we are developing a growing understanding of the core causes that underpin failure; but is this growing understanding both necessary and sufficient to deliver success?

Part of the answer depends on when we measure success. Success is clearly a relative term that is context- and viewpoint- dependent. It is also time-dependent as the view of a success, or failure, of a system or artifact may vary with time.

But there is also an essential contradiction. Projects are designed to deliver a product, or artifact as an end point. Delivery and handover can thus be viewed as a successful result of a project. Yet, this may lead to deeper questions about the nature of project management. Is project management simply concerned with the creation of something that did not previously exist, or does it go deeper and look at the need to make a difference, achieve an outcome, or deliver promised benefits?

If we accept the former, we have a project management that is focused on delivery. If we delve into the latter we are obliged to adopt a longer-term position, one that extends beyond delivery of a project into the benefit realisation and investment cycles.

Society has also become increasingly engaged with the concept of sustainability as it becomes increasingly obvious that the competitive race to accumulate profits has depleted resources and challenged environments. The short-term focus of projects, which encourages immediate exploitation to deliver identified targets, thus stands in direct contradiction to need to adopt a responsible stance and consider the impact on future generations. Indeed, we might even contend that projects, with their inherent race towards success, contradict the notion of sustainability. As we engage in more and more projects, we may forget to take a strategic view or ignore the long-term perspective. The more rapid the results, and the smaller the cycle of delivery, the less

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<sup>1</sup> *The Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. The articles are coordinated by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>.*

time we have for developing holistic thinking patterns and considering the longer term impact of our decisions and actions.

Adopting sustainability as a core value and a strategic vision forces us to rethink our relationship with projects and change. It may also engender new thinking about growth, profits, consumption and their longer-term impacts.

Brulin and Svennson contend that even successful projects are viewed in a short-sighted way. Their research suggests that very few projects evaluate the long-term impacts. Moreover, it identifies an extraordinary level of failure in the durability of large change programmes and projects.

The accompanying article is based on their recent book, *Managing Sustainable Development Programmes, a Learning Approach to Change*, published by Gower. The book offers tremendous insights into the key issues required for long-term management with a sustainable focus. It provides practitioners with a new way of thinking and considering the role of projects and the benefits that can be delivered.

One of the key messages is the need to move from project management to project organization. Project organizations are capable of fostering a longer-term perspective with an increasing focus on active ownership, collaboration and developmental learning. The key hypothesis of the work is that project organization is fundamental to sustainable development work. The evidence amassed by the authors shows that active ownership and collaboration between different stakeholders and actors, combined with dynamics of developmental learning. Indeed developmental logic offers a new paradigm that extends beyond the familiar production logic.

The search for environmental solutions requires the questioning of existing paradigms. It also requires new ways of engaging multi groups of stakeholders and the development of proactive strategic thinking about our context, environment and the long-term implications of actions. By adopting a better-informed position we may begin our journey to play a part in shaping and sustaining our environment. Willingness to give up the urge to control combined with insightful and reflective practice can thus develop into new ways of making a difference.

Robert Gutman observed that “*every profession bears the responsibility to understand the circumstances that enable its existence.*” Our responsibility now is to invoke the long-term perspective when considering deliverables, benefits and investments, and the strategic and systemic aspects when addressing impacts and concerns to enable us to engage with change in new ways and improve our long-term track record for success. In considering the success of initiatives we are thus condemned to take longer before we form our judgments and pronouncements.

## About the Author



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