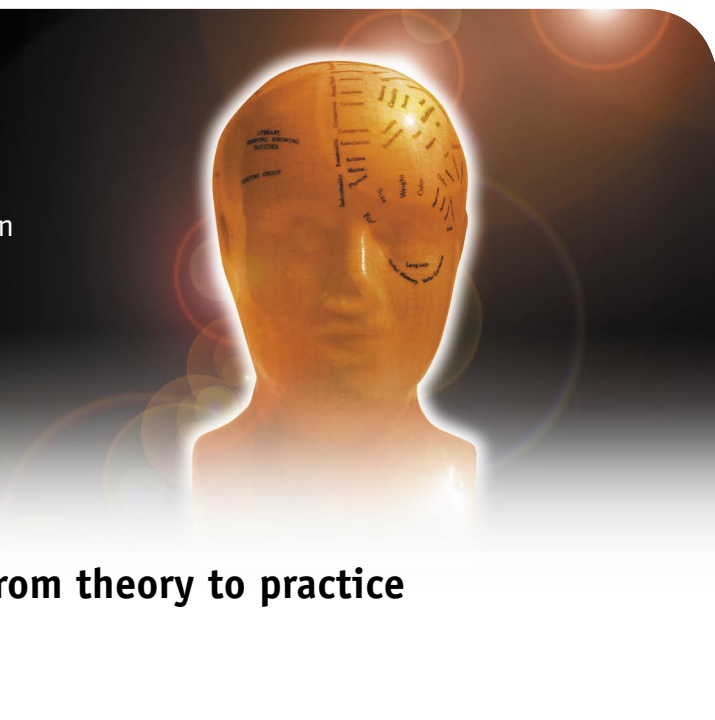


Lucid Thought

Ruth Murray-Webster & Peter Simon

First published in Project Manager Today



LUCID
08
THOUGHT

Hard + Soft = Success; from theory to practice

From time to time, one of our Lucid Thoughts is triggered by an academic article we have read. From the discussion on the dilemma between the popularity (and therefore over-use and misuse) of the terms project and Project Manager and development of a serious, theory-based profession (Lucid Thought 46), we were left with the question - should we or anyone care? Should we indeed try to limit the use of the term Project Manager as a means of focusing serious attention on the theoretical basis and practice of project management to deliver new things, or should we just **'go with the flow'** and embrace all manifestations of the language?

Our instinct is for the former. The effective practice of project management appears to be increasingly essential for organisations to reap tangible value from initiatives to design and build new things, or transform working practices. With so much investment tied up in an embryonic profession, it must be considered a serious business with practice supported by academic rigour.

Having discussed this point of view internally, we enjoyed reading the article in Volume 25, issue 3 of the International Journal of Project Management (ISSN 0263-7863) entitled **"The changing paradigms of project management"**. This article, a prize winner for the author Julien Pollack from the University of Technology - Sydney, is an excellent summary of the academic literature supporting project management and raises some fundamental points for the development of effective practice.

The article examines the cases for two broad paradigms articulated in the management literature that, for ease, are referred to as:

- **Hard**, i.e. based on rational, reductionist, quantitative principles with the role of the Project Manager as expert controller and the role of the team as 'followers';

- **Soft**, i.e. based on interpretive, inductive, qualitative principles with the role of the Project Manager as facilitator and the role of the team as 'expert participants'.

In the paper, Julien notes that **'no one perspective is appropriate to all situations'** and that Project Managers need to **'adapt the approach taken to suit the current demands [of their work]'**.

MOCs	HOCs
The Systematic Necessities	The 'People' Necessities
For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance • Methodology • The Requirement • ICT systems • Roles and Responsibilities • Quality Management • Risk Management • Policy • Earned Value • Benefit Management • Configuration 	For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust • Decision-making • Leadership • Collaboration • Bravery and Judgement • Resolving Ambiguity • Innovation and Change • Political Factors • Risk Attitude • Delegation • Communication
Methodological and Operational Competences	Human and Organisational Competences

The two broad paradigms from the literature are analogous to the excellent work being done by a UK company, EngagementWorks,

who articulate the two paradigms as MOCs and HOCs; noting that many Project Managers and the organisations that employ them conceive their work as requiring attention to the Methodological and Operational Competences (MOCs); often at the expense of the Human and Organisational Competences (HOCs).

EngagementWorks seeks to persuade us that: **“with the increasing complexity and ‘uniqueness’ of a project, the call on project players’ ability to work together effectively increases substantially and becomes a critical success factor, the absence of which will lead to failure”.**

This Lucid Thought asserts that it is the combination of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ that leads to effectiveness; that neither MOCs nor HOCs alone are enough - in fact both are needed but the ‘mix’ is situational and dependent on the complexity and ‘uniqueness’ of the project.

This means that effective Project Managers are as able to use rational tools and techniques for requirements definition, scope decomposition, probabilistic risk-based schedule and budget assessments etc. as they are people-based approaches to problem solving, decision-making and issue resolution. This is in line with what is taught on most educational and learning programmes for project management nowadays. Most of the mainstream providers of learning and qualifications recognise that method is important, but not enough.

What is missing though is perhaps a recognition that the defining competence for a Project Manager is deciding in what situations to take what approach; one could say **‘Situational Project Management’**. Some projects will be best suited to a ‘hard’ paradigm and success will depend largely on taking a disciplined and controlled approach to achievement of activities in a project with little ‘novelty factor’. In such a situation, HOCs are important in getting the team to work together, but probably less important than having the right MOCs in place. Other projects will rely almost entirely on the team working closely together to define what is needed and the optimal path through more novel work in an environment of political

complexity or high change.

A defining feature of projects is that they are unique. Our assertion is that rarely will two projects have enough similarities to require just the same approach and therefore Project Managers must be able to **‘size-up’** the situation and make judgements on what the particular situation needs.

Back to Julien Pollack’s paper where he quotes researchers who claim that the field of project management currently lacks a coherent underlying theoretical basis and that the development of such a basis is one of the most crucial issues in the development of the profession. Our take on this is that what is urgent is not a search for new theory; rather a search for new ways to make the existing theory work in practice i.e. using the appropriate practices for the ‘unique’ situation you find yourself in. If you can do this and flex your project management style appropriately then all the projects you manage will have a far greater chance of success than if you applied a **‘one size fits all approach’**.

To read more Lucid Thoughts from Lucidus Consulting, please visit our website www.lucidusconsulting.com