

Planning to fail? A critique of current project definitions as a basis for benefit realisation

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## Planning to fail? A critique of current project definitions as a basis for benefit realisation

Summary: This paper explores the notion that current project definitions provide a singular view: that of project managers and this perspective leads to limited boundaries which are prejudicial to good project delivery. Thus, it takes a radically different view of project failure from that which is generally accepted.

We will contend that viewing projects through this limiting lens often results in failure being attributed to reasons that are only symptomatic, and that root causes are not uncovered. The paper establishes that project failure is endemic and has existed for over 25 years. Attempts to apply control and prescriptive methodologies have made the position worse.

We go on to describe an appreciative research project that uses a definition of projects emphasising the realisation of benefits, rather than production of outputs. We then give an overview of the success this has achieved so far. We conclude by making some proposals for further research.

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## Introduction

This paper discusses an appreciative perspective on research into ways of improving project performance, conducted in a United Kingdom (UK) unitary local authority. It will set out the reasons for the research, the underpinning principles and the theses being proposed.

We will begin by examining the three most influential definitions of the project concept applied in the UK, suggesting that these lead to inappropriate behaviours, poor decision making and ultimately to projects that fail to deliver the benefits desired. Some of the reasons put forward for project failure by leading authorities will then be examined. We suggest that these views are seen through the singular lens shaped by these definitions, so that the real causes of project failure are masked. In consequence, all attempts to improve project performance come to nothing, as the solutions are applied to the wrong explanations and the underlying causes are left untouched.

The paper will propose that current approaches to project performance are dualistic in nature, utilising prescriptive methodologies based on the three definitions mentioned above, and the authors propose a different, pluralistic approach and describe the successful impact such an approach had on the organisation the subject of this research.

This work has been informed by Systems Thinking, drawing on work by Checkland and Holwell (1998); Stowell (2009, 2013); Winter and Smith (2006). An approach of action research was adopted, combined with engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007).

## Project definitions

This section examines the three most influential definitions of 'project' utilised in the UK, and shows that they are written primarily by project managers. Unsurprisingly, the definitions reflect this singular viewpoint. We propose that this singularity leads to a very narrow approach, with a limiting boundary focussed on delivering an output to specified parameters (usually cost and time). In the following section we further suggest that this limiting boundary is a factor in the failure of projects to deliver the benefits for which they were commissioned.

The three most influential definitions utilised in the UK are those from PRINCE2, the Project Management Institute (PMI), and the Association for Project Management (APM). We examine each of these in turn in more detail below.

PRINCE2 is a methodology first developed as PROMPT by the UK Government in 1986, in an effort to stem the very high rate of project failure it was experiencing. PRINCE is an acronym for PRojects IN Controlled Environments. The methodology was last refreshed in 2009, and the authors of all versions were project managers. That this approach is

fundamentally flawed is evidenced by the significant failures of UK Government projects such as the National Health Service (NHS) IT project (Public Service, 2011); a new Air Control Centre, (BBC, 2002); a back office service for the Research Councils, (eGov monitor, 2011); and more recently the e-borders project, which was scrapped at considerable cost (Glick, 2014). This is just a small sample of failed Government projects and it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail every such failure. Further details can be found from National Audit Office (2010), Callear Consulting Ltd. (2014) The Standish Group (2009) and Shore (2009).

The PRINCE2 definition of a project is as follows:

*“A project is a temporary organisation that is created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to an agreed Business case.”*

(Office of Government Commerce, 2009)

This definition forces a focus onto the delivery of products – outputs - with no consideration of *benefits*. The insistence on delivering to an agreed business case, in practice cost, time and quality – two best guesses and a phenomenon according to Atkinson (1999), introduces a further narrowing of the boundary drawn around projects (Ulrich, 2005).

Figure 1 shows how the definition of a PRINCE2 project is only a small part of the totality of a project and limits the boundary. PRINCE2 explicitly excludes feasibility from the project, although it does suggest a project may be commissioned to carry out feasibility. (Office of Government Commerce, 2009, p. 6)

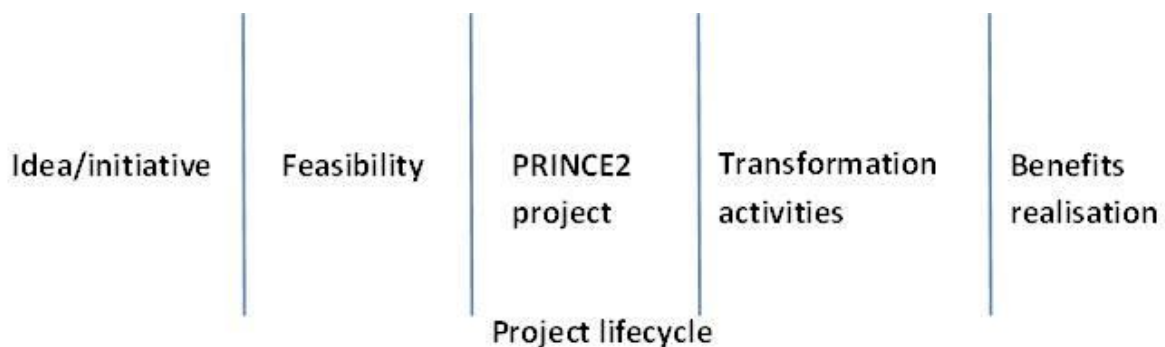


Figure 1 Where the PRINCE2 definition of a project positions in the project lifecycle.

The next definition we examine is that offered by the Project Management Institute (PMI). This is the largest project management association in the world. It has a global presence, although it is based in the United States of America where it was founded in 1969. Both Lenfle and Loch (2010); and Morris (2013) contend that Robert McNamara, who became the USA Secretary of Defense in 1961, significantly influenced the way project management, and the PMI, developed the control and prescriptive processes of projects. This singular viewpoint is still prevalent today, especially in government projects. The following is the PMI definition of a project:

*“A project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to produce a unique product, service or result.”*

### Project Management Institute (PMI, 2008)

This definition again applies a very narrow boundary, and is clearly describing an output as the end point of a project, with no consideration of benefits realisation for the commissioning organisation. The Body of Knowledge produced by the PMI further strengthens this narrow viewpoint by detailing processes and tools that concentrate on the delivery of an output rather than the realisation of benefits.

These two definitions are very similar and are very focussed on the production of outputs. As Figure 1 shows, this is only a fractional part of the whole product.

The Association for Project Management was established in 1974 and is affiliated to the International Project Management Association (IPMA) - the first project management association to be formed, in 1965. The APM is UK based and has recently gained chartered status from the UK government; a status which will undoubtedly increase its global influence over the next few years. It offers the following definition:

*“A unique, transient endeavour undertaken to achieve planned objectives.”*

Association of Project Management (APM, 2014)

This definition is broader than the following two and suggests that projects are intended to achieve objectives. However, these may be interpreted broadly, i.e. as business objectives, or more narrowly, i.e. as focussing in on outputs.

These definitions are produced by project managers and do not take into account any other perspectives. The definitions are similar, fundamentally defining projects in terms of an output delivered to targets. These definitions become the lens through which projects are viewed, managed and measured and lead to a singular viewpoint which adherents claim to be correct, with any other viewpoint therefore being wrong. A further issue with these definitions is that they describe projects as single entities, e.g. ‘we manage a project’; whereas in reality any project will be comprised of a number of activities carried out by a number of people. Projects consist of multiple activities and actors, which are subject to interdependencies, interrelationships, and interconnectedness between these activities and those involved. Figure 2 gives a graphical representation of this systemic viewpoint. The narrow boundary and tight focus from the definitions above does not take into account the diversity of these activities. In addition, judgements of project success and failure are shaped by these definitions. This leads to poor understanding of the causes of project failure, and the best way to promote project success. These issues will be explored in the next section.

An alternative more holistic definition is:

*“A project is a temporary organization to which resources are assigned to do work to deliver beneficial change.”*

(Turner, 2008, p. 2)

This definition takes a different stance, one which the authors of PRINCE2 ignored in their 2009 refresh, and which places the emphasis on realising benefits rather than on outputs - a significant change of worldview. Turner’s definition considers that the true purpose of any project is to deliver beneficial change, not simply an output such as product or service. The research project reported here defines projects thus:

*“Projects are defined as a temporary endeavour comprising activities with resource constraints with the purpose of realising benefits.”*

(Summers, 2008, p. 5)

In applying this definition to the subject organisation, the emphasis was on the purpose of achieving benefits and suggests that a project comprises multiple activities and is subject to resource constraints. The concept of projects being commissioned to realise benefits was introduced into the organisation and re-iterated through the model which was implemented in the subject organisation. Figure 2 shows the dynamic of project delivery with the realisation of benefits as the purpose.

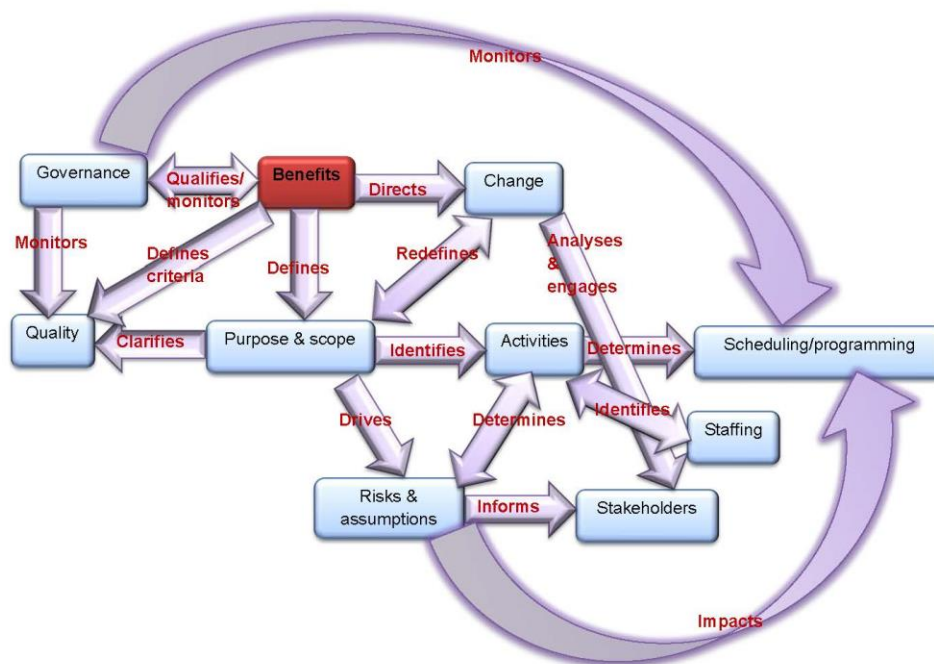


Figure 2 Benefits as the driver of projects.

### Project failure

We examine three investigations into project failure: those by The Standish Group who produce the Chaos Report; Nelson’s retrospectives at the University of West Virginia; and Flyvbjerg et. al and their review of mega projects. These authors suggest a commonality of reasons and we posit these are suggested from a singular, rather than pluralistic view, through the lens of the project definitions given in the preceding section from project managers, rather than the executives who commission projects.

The reasons put forward for project failure are common across all three of these writings and recently, in his blog, Rosenhead iterated these reasons (Rosenhead, 2014). This commonality is notwithstanding the fact that these findings span 20 years from The CHAOS report in 1995

to Rosenhead's findings based upon the people whom he was teaching who represented five different countries (Flyvbjerg, 2005, 2014; Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003; Flyvbjerg, Garbuio, & Lovallo, 2009; Nelson, 2005, 2007; The Standish Group, 1996, 1999, 2009, 2013).

The reasons given for project failure are as follows:

1. Poor planning
2. Lack of senior management support
3. Unclear objectives
4. Poor risk management
5. Competing priorities
6. Too many projects
7. Failing to engage effectively with stakeholders & lack of engagement by stakeholders

We contend that this is little more than a shopping list of symptoms caused by a rigid and tight focus on delivering an output to cost and time. As a result of this focus, other activities do not receive the amount of time and energy they need; so stakeholders are ignored, planning is skipped and risks are dealt with only when they become issues.

It can also be seen that this list is viewed through the lens of a project manager e.g. the claimed lack of senior management support. It seems unlikely that the executives, who commissioned the project, expecting their business to be transformed, would refuse to support the project manager. Those authors listed and others in producing these lists do not ask: "*Why is planning poor? What are the conditions which are causing ineffective engagement with stakeholders?*" There are many other questions which need to be asked and answered in order to really understand the totality of project failure.

Another factor which is unhelpful in this shopping list approach is the suggestion that each of the listed items can be dealt with individually, thus leading to project success. The reasons given in the lists are actually interconnected and interrelated and cannot be dissolved in isolation, are multicausal and vary in their impact and effect. (Bignell & Fortune, 1984, p. 8) Dealing with project failure in this piecemeal fashion inevitably leads to continued failure, as has been witnessed.

(The Standish Group, 2014), in its April newsletter, states that they have conducted a survey of the Standish User Research Forum (SURF) members with a single question "What is your definition of success?" Six definitions were provided and these, with their percentage scores, are shown below:

1. on-budget, 32%
2. on-time, 30%
3. on-target (requirements), 26%
4. on-goal (organizational strategy), 29%
5. valuable, 52%
6. satisfied, 41%

A total of 309 responses were received and each respondent was allowed up to four votes. The percentages reflect that the criterion was cast as one of the four votes. In addition about 33% of the respondents selected all of the criteria as their definition of success and 15% chose on-budget, on-time and on-target; the iron triangle.

The Standish group then applied the six definitions against the projects in their database and found that only 1.2% would be considered successful; whereas if the single definition of on-budget was the sole criterion then 42% of projects in the database would be considered successful. Viewed another way an amazing 98.8% of the projects reviewed have failed, even using the on-budget criterion 58% are failures.

The newsletter concludes by stating “*The Standish Group believes that organizations should forget the triple constraints and focus on the value of their project portfolio, not individual projects.*”

This is a major change of emphasis for The Standish Group, and a more holistic view with a clear departure from the Project Management Institute’s position that success should be measured by conformance to the triple constraint albeit having taken 20 years to reach this conclusion!

In reviewing these works on project failure we suggest that the thinking is from a singular perspective; that of the project manager and with its narrow focus is also reductionist, two traps of non-Systems Thinking according to (Reynolds & Holwell, 2010, p. 6). The Standish Group (1996) report Cobb’s Paradox, attributed to Martin Cobb of the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, which states

*“We know why projects fail, we know how to prevent their failure -- so why do they still fail?”*

Cobb was involved in the original CHAOS report produced by The Standish Group, which no doubt contributed to his belief that he understood the ‘whys and know-hows’ of project failure. This ‘paradox’ is based on assumptions and a lack of understanding of root causes. The first assumption is that we know why projects fail. However, as can be seen from above this is only at a first level. Reviewing the reasons listed above, it is clear that there is no suggestion that we need to understand why there is, for instance, poor planning or unclear objectives. It seems that The Standish Group accepted these reasons without repeatedly asking ‘why?’ – a question which will assist in ascertaining root causality. Cobb’s second assumption is that it is feasible to deal with these reasons, thus preventing project failure. Calling Cobb’s statement a paradox bestows upon it a standing it does not deserve nor is it true, a condition for a paradox. It assumes that by dealing with symptoms, this will be sufficient to dissolve the problem and there is a lack of thinking about the root causes. In his statement, Cobb falls into the trap of dogmatism with his singular viewpoint (Reynolds & Holwell, 2010, p. 6) and being stuck in the knowers stance. (Hinken, 2005, 2007; Summers, 2012) The “...working on the basis of a single unquestioning perspective...” leads to a trap of non-systemic thinking – dogmatism (Reynolds & Holwell, 2010, p. 6). This trap of dogmatism at best constrains thinking so that it is narrow in focus, or at worst no thinking at all, because the actor *knows* the ‘right’ solution.

A further issue with the accepted view of project failure is the reductionist thinking that is being applied – a further trap of non-systemic thinking according to Reynolds and Holwell (2010, p. 6) and focusses on the parts to the exclusion and detriment of the whole



(Checkland, 1999, p. 45). This reductionism is described by Reynolds and Holwell (2010, p. 6) as a trap of non-systemic thinking; “*avoiding the inevitable interconnectivity between variables...*” As Figure 2 makes clear the activities or variables in projects are interconnected.

The main corollary of both traps is no *unlearning* takes place, so that those who fall into the traps rely on acquired knowledge that may be not be appropriate to the problem environment. It becomes very easy to rely upon methodologies based on poor definitions believing that following these prescriptive routines will guarantee project success despite the huge volume of evidence to the contrary.

Without a deeper investigation, it becomes easy for governments and organisations to prescribe methods that only deal with the symptoms of failure to meet cost and time targets. Such measures do not address causes, and it is therefore no surprise that expected benefits of projects continue to be elusive. Furthermore, this problem has been recognised in the project management community for many years. Shenhar, Milosevic, Dvir, and Thamhain (2007, p. 702) comment: ‘*This operational mindset is clearly reflected in the project management literature, which has traditionally used time, budget, and performance as the main indicators for project success. Any of these measures—or even all taken together—can lead to incomplete and misleading assessment.*’

The authors argue that if the lens is altered to a focus on delivering beneficial change, then the lists of reasons become symptoms of a poor and limiting worldview caused by delivering an output and pursuing the targets of cost and time. By making these constraints targets activities such as risk management, stakeholder engagement, planning and communication amongst others become less important and project failure becomes almost inevitable as these activities are not given the requisite time and energy.

Some projects were indeed commissioned to deliver an output; e.g. the Pyramids, the Manhattan project to produce an atomic bomb, Polaris missiles etc. Those who commissioned the Pyramids probably didn’t consider the cost or how long the construction would take; the output was primary. The Manhattan project had time constraints, the atomic bomb had to be produced before the Germans achieved something similar, or World War 2 would have a much different outcome. Polaris also was about the output. The NASA space programme of the 1960s was concerned with getting man on the moon and returning him safely (Kennedy, 1961) - again the focus is on the output within a given timescale. As projects were totally output focussed within the triple constraint of cost, time and quality (Atkinson, 1999), a project manager was appointed to deliver the project. The appointee would be given a project brief detailing the specifications of the output together with a budget and timescale. Once the target output had been achieved the project manager could be released either back to the day job or the contractor who supplied the project manager. This model is still in vogue as any glance through job sites will reveal. Appointments are for the anticipated duration of the project; this creates a problem of loss of focus in the last few weeks of such a contract as well as the project manager having no ownership or loyalty other than delivering the output to the given parameters. Furthermore, valuable knowledge is lost as a project team breaks up and moves on without attempting to reflect over the activities undertaken, or to capture lessons learned. (English, 2006)

At some point, organisations started to ask why projects were being pursued with significant cost and time overruns. This led to control mechanisms being put in place and the development of PROMPT (the precursor of PRINCE2) around 1987 in the UK. Lenfle and Loch (2010); Morris (2013) both provide histories of projects and project management, although they disagree over the Manhattan project, with Morris stating that it bears little relationship to current project management in that there was an adaptive and flexible approach. This is the nub of Lenfle and Loch's argument; that project management has lost its roots in adaptive practice. Notwithstanding the control mechanisms, projects continued to fail to produce the expected outcomes and cost and time overruns are commonplace as shown in a previous section. Eventually the concept of projects producing beneficial change (Turner, 2008, p. 2) started to come to the fore and initially programme management was seen as a way of ensuring that projects delivered benefits. The Office of Government Commerce (OGC) introduced Managing Successful Programmes (MSP). Programmes are considered to be groups of projects and business as usual activities linked together to produce a common objective. The concept of a role designed to realise benefits, the business change manager, was identified and made explicit in the programme methodology.

This approach was not entirely successful, so Portfolio management made its appearance. This approach borrowed from the discipline of finance, in particular investments, so that projects and programmes were considered in their entirety across an organisation and explicitly linked to strategic objectives. The portfolio approach is recent and immature in most organisations. There is now an emphasis on project leadership so project managers are now expected to be leaders doing the right thing rather than the thing right. This does require that the project leader is involved in determining the projects to be commissioned which is often not the case, especially with organisations contracting project managers solely to deliver the output. Further initiatives designed to deal with the failure of projects to deliver anticipated benefits include strategic project management and organisational project management.

However, the real issue is that at the heart of these initiatives are projects with their limiting definition of delivering outputs with a strong focus on cost and time parameters. Is it any surprise that organisations including governments are left disappointed with the results from their projects and programmes whether portfolio managed or not? This basic model is not fit for purpose for organisation's requirements and expectations in the 21st century. Whitty (2013) suggests that the business model is 20 - 30 years out of date. We contend that Whitty is being generous; the model is over 50 years old. The desire to gain value from investments using a model that was used in the 1960s to put man on the moon, without regard to benefits, is no longer appropriate. Furthermore, no amount of control or control mechanisms will alter the fact that the basic system is flawed. As (Morris, 2013, p. 60) states *'The model of project management represented by the PMBOK® Guide is one essentially of delivery execution: ... The ethos of the discipline is then to 'monitor and control', not to actively shape and drive solutions...'*

A projects needs to be viewed as a system to gain a true appreciation of the various elements and their properties. In attempting to solve the problem of poor project management, the concentration tends to be on either training the project manager in the assumed *'right'* way to conduct activities known as compliance training or increased control over governance. This may optimise these parts, but optimisation of a part is likely to lead to sub-optimisation of the

whole (Deming, 1982, 2000; Machon, 1965; Seddon, 2008). Even by limiting the boundary to the project as the system of interest, the optimisation of a single part will lead to sub-optimisation of the project as a whole, yet the solutions to improve project delivery consistently concentrate on a part and ignore the whole. It is therefore small wonder that projects continue to fail with such regularity. The approach we advocate considers the whole, not just the project elements, and the wider system in which projects were delivered.

PRINCE2 is a good governance methodology; however, it does not consider the whole system of the project nor the bigger organisational context. It also is a methodology born of a belief that control is the way to improve project delivery. It stems from an incomplete understanding of the real nature of projects and leads to sub-optimisation.

This limited thinking is also revealed in the way projects are staffed, with project managers often being recruited after a brief has been produced and leaving the project on completion of output, although it is not unknown for multiple project managers to be employed on single projects.

## Research methodology

Project performance was considered to be poor within the unitary local authority under review, so an exploration of practice in other organisations was undertaken. At the same time, a review of the literature on projects was conducted, focussing especially on reasons for failure as discussed above. This research was concerned with identifying reasons for poor project performance in the Council, designing a model to improve project performance, then implementing this model and finally evaluating the results from this intervention. The research was designed to answer the following questions;

1. *What impact would a systemic approach have on project performance?*
2. *What impact would with an emphasis on education, rather than one based on control processes and compliance training, have on project performance?*
3. *What impact would a programme based on active learning have on the performance of attendees on such a programme?*

The model introduced into the Council, with its three elements, served both as a means to improve practice and to learn more about ways of improving practice. Thus the model serves as both an epistemological and ontological device, being a method for discerning knowledge and applying knowledge, or double-loop learning as Argyris and Schön (1974) have expressed it. The three elements comprised

1. Governance based upon PRINCE2
2. A learning and development programme
3. A community of practice

As illustrated in Figure 3.



Figure 3 Model introduced into council

A Systems Thinking approach based on Vickers' concept of appreciation was used throughout. Vickers (1968, p. 130) writes of an appreciative system as a continual process of learning which he believes has three phases, "*information, valuation and action.*" Reflection on existing practices was followed by action, which yielded new information. This, in turn, was reflected upon before further action for improvement was taken. Throughout the period of inquiry, the researcher reflected upon the problem and the reactions by people across the organisation, together with data from external sources (e.g. experiences of other organisations or articles and books, both academic and practitioner-based). In carrying out this research, an approach based in Systems Thinking was adopted and so followed recommendations from Checkland and Holwell (1998); Stowell (2009, 2013); Winter and Smith (2006). This approach included action research combined with engaged scholarship. Systems Thinking is capable of yielding insights into the nature of the phenomena examined, and also methods of understanding this phenomenon (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 36) and additionally enables inquirers to consider different perspectives on the phenomena, giving a fuller picture to support problem dissolving.

(Van de Ven, 2007, p. ix) defines engaged scholarship as '*... a participative form of research for obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors and practitioners) to understand a complex social problem.*' He argues that engaged scholarship produces richer knowledge than if just the single researcher were involved in the research. In taking this approach, the different perspectives of the actors involved in projects were accommodated and a more systemic definition introduced into the organisation. This approach also allowed for projects to be viewed in a pluralistic way; that is taking more than one perspective. Different actors will expect different results from projects, and so it is necessary to go beyond a singular view from the project manager, strongly influenced by the project definitions examined previously.

Figure 4 shows Van de Ven's diamond model of engaged scholarship.

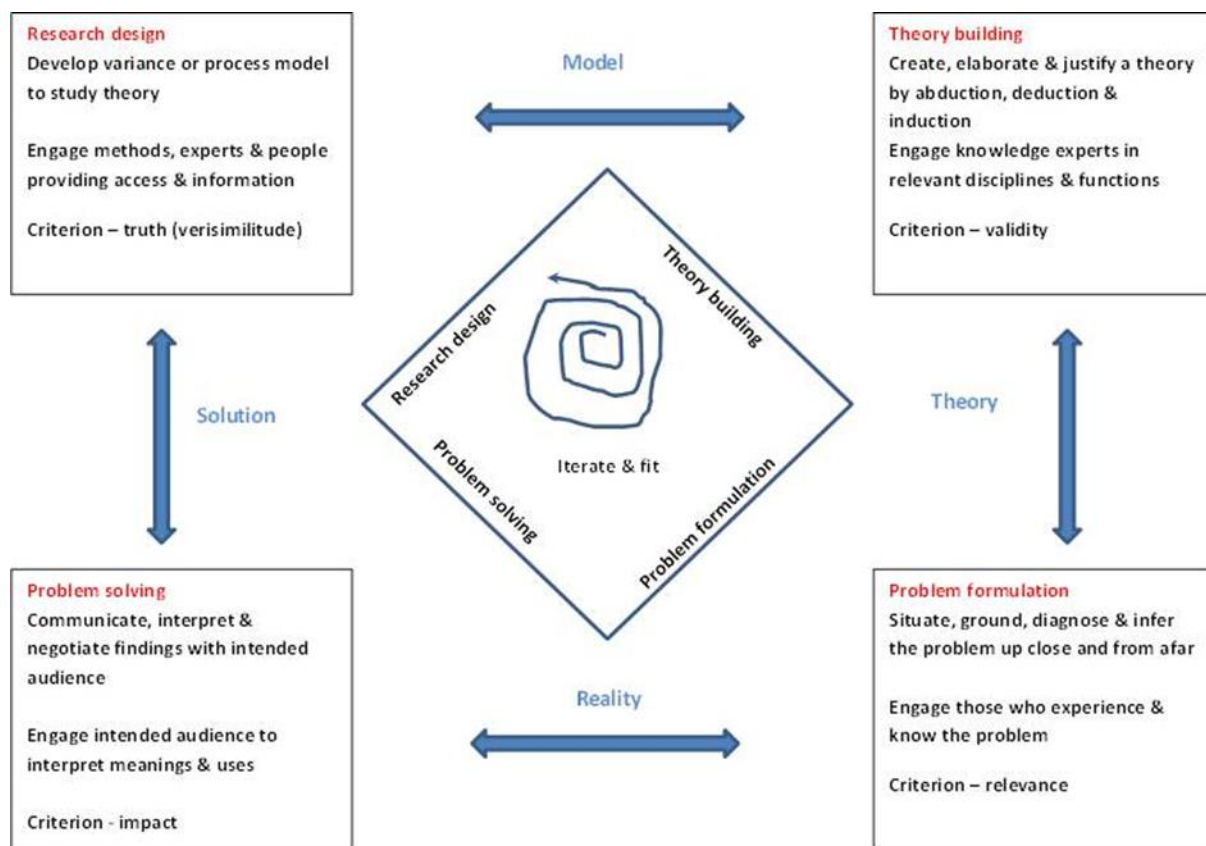


Figure 4 Engaged scholarship diamond model adapted from (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 10)

This model shows the four stages and the interactions discretely, but in practice my discussions with the stakeholders went across these boundaries. For example, in discussing the problem the Council faced with the tier 1 and tier 2 managers, some offered their own solutions to the problem. In order to design an intervention and the components it is necessary to gain an understanding (Bignell & Fortune, 1984, p. 157); an appreciation of the system of interest (Stowell & Welch, 2012). All of the input needed to be reflected upon to gain a full appreciation of the factors impacting upon the systems. The research did engage with interested parties; albeit more in the theory building, problem formulation and problem solving domain than the research design one. This approach provided a pluralistic approach to the problem domain providing a broad view of the system of interest.

Action research was chosen as the research approach due to its systemic nature, and the fact that the researcher was actively involved in the whole intervention as facilitator in the learning and development programme in addition to responsibility for project performance within the organisation. Action research is an approach which combines action and research in a collaborative, iterative, and emergent inquiry process (Holian & Coghlan, 2013, p. 400); (Saunders, Thornhill, & Lewis, 2012, p. 183) which links well with Vickers (1968, p. 130) description of an *'Appreciative System as a continual process of learning'*.

Action research also places an emphasis on practical outcomes (Bryman, 2012, p. 393) and developing solutions to problems (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 183) and this research is concerned with practice and dissolving poor project performance.

In his 1946 paper Lewin writes of action research

*'...a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action'* (Lewin, 1946, p. 35)

He also considers this research method

*'...a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action'* (Lewin, 1946, p. 37)

Which is similar to Vickers' appreciative system of learning and its iteration of information-valuation-action and was applied throughout this research

## Research results

This research was conducted over a period of five years. Throughout that period, the emphasis was placed on the purpose of projects as delivering benefits, and not simply a defined output. Benefits realisation was at the very heart of projects and every document, project board meeting and workshop emphasised this as the purpose. (Summers, 2011).

Project management within the organisation had been rated as poor by the Audit Commission in 2004, and consequently subject to annual reviews. Within two years of the start of this intervention, the Audit Commission was satisfied with the improvement and no longer conducted annual reviews. In the first six months a project was cancelled because the benefits expected did not justify the cost and effort, and this saved in excess of £4 million which could be better invested. Interestingly this would constitute a failure based on the criteria used by The Standish Group. Projects were subject to evaluation reports with the benefits and their measures determined before the project had expended too much resource and increasingly projects delivered against these reports. Interestingly, 90% of projects commissioned and finished within this five year period did not exceed the cost and time constraints imposed upon them. This is in marked contrast to projects which focus on the twin targets of cost and time; we reflect that, as a Ugandan proverb says:

*'He who hunts two rats, catches none'* (Special Dictionary, 2005).

The UK Government through its Major Projects Authority (MPA) actually lists six criteria to establish project success; (Steel, Summersgill, & Band, 2010) which is unlikely as The Standish Group have shown with 98.8% of the projects in their database failing against six similar criteria. (The Standish Group, 2014). This paper is concentrating on the improvement shown in project delivery however the research also suggested that a learning programme which concentrated on facilitating learners understanding of the necessary activities to deliver a whole life project would produce an improvement in performance. This performance improvement was not limited to project delivery; the learning impacted all of their work activities (Summers, 2013). This element of the research is beyond the scope of this current paper.

## Conclusion

Projects are not commissioned to deliver an output to specified constraints despite the definitions examined earlier; they are commissioned to deliver beneficial change to the organisation and it is important to clarify the purpose of the project. Gaining clarity of purpose is an important principle, not just in terms of projects, but also other activities such as designing degree courses and units, learning activities and corporate strategies *inter alia*. The purpose of projects is to deliver benefits to the organisation, usually monetary or capable of being expressed in monetary terms. Sometimes, however, the benefits are intangible, e.g. improvement in staff morale or the reputation of the organisation.

The definitions of projects examined above are viewed from the perspective of project managers, yet it is the business managers who commission projects. We suggest that it is they who should be defining projects, in conjunction with other engaged actors, including staff and customers, whose contextual understandings may be crucial. A systemic perspective will produce improved return on investment, as demonstrated in the research undertaken in the subject organisation. There needs to be challenge to the current project definitions to enable more relevant definitions to become accepted. In addition, a level of unlearning and relearning will be required so that business managers can take ownership of projects and the *realisation of benefits*.

In this research there were three iterations of a development programme and other standalone workshops delivered. The principal researcher assisted in the facilitation of around 85% of these workshops, and in this way helped to embed the concept of benefits delivery as the reason for commissioning projects. The intervention was a systemic approach using top down, the governance process; bottom up, the learning activities; and left field, the community of practice. Figure 5 shows this graphically:

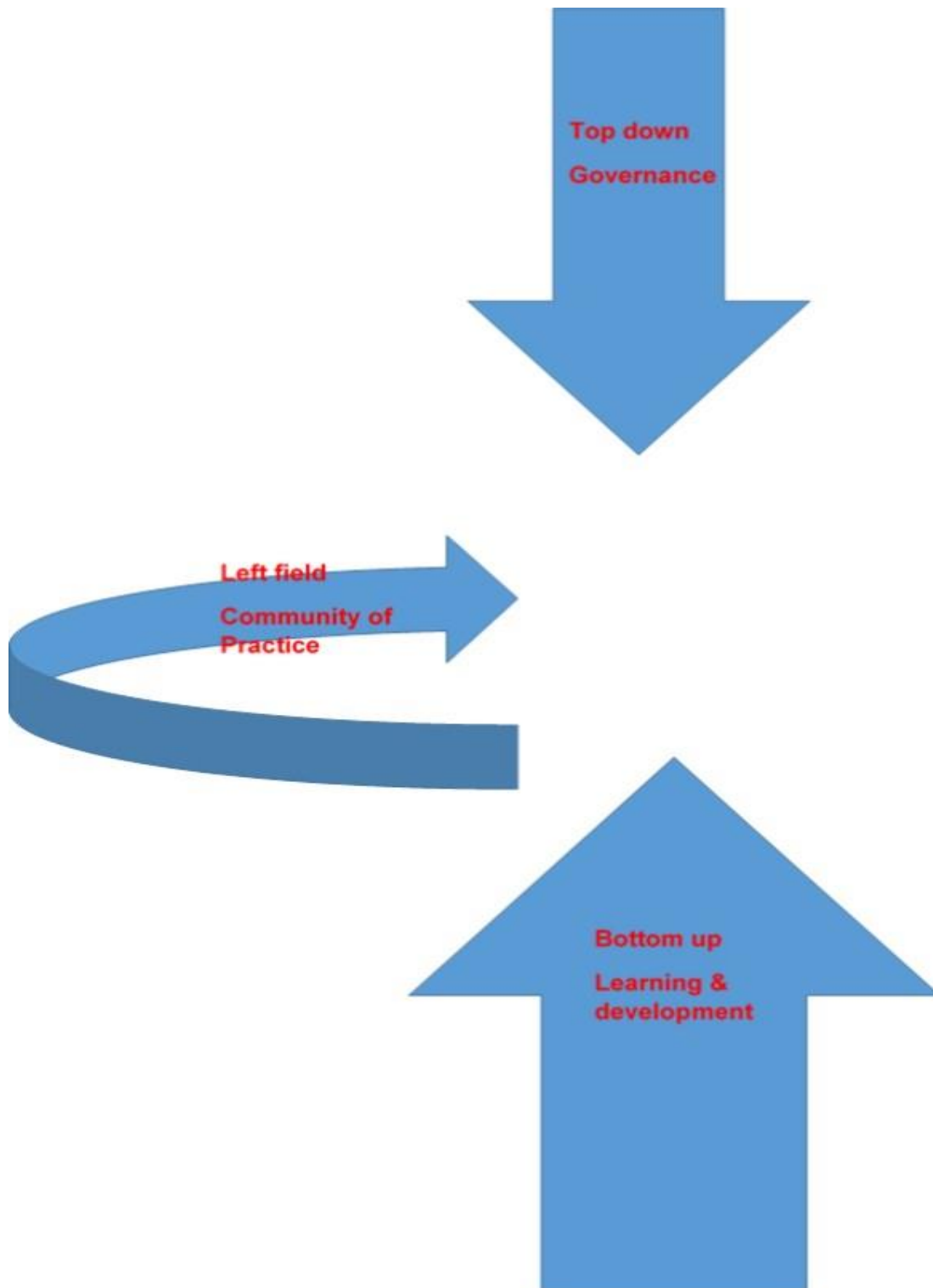


Figure 5 Systemic nature of the intervention

This exploration of project failure, and the reasons listed, demonstrates the singular perspective of project definitions and project managers and does not allow for the whole of a project lifecycle, nor indeed are the real root causes of failure exposed. The reasons put forward are superficial, being symptoms of a project definition focussed on delivering an output, to the twin targets of cost and time.



We contend that the current definitions of projects are dogmatic and reductionist, as explored in this paper. A radical change of viewpoint is required if projects are ever to fully deliver the return on investment organisations are expecting. The research described suggests that a better way forward is achievable. However, the authors are aware that this work has only been conducted in one specific organisation and so the results are not generalizable. Further research needs to be conducted in other organisations, applying the model with its emphasis on benefits and learning. Another avenue of research is to ascertain from business managers whether they feel the current definitions of projects are appropriate and, if not, what definitions they would prefer.

This further research has the potential to improve the return on investment in projects significantly and change 50 years' experience of failure into more positive future outcomes for organisations. Additionally, if further research supports our contentions, then approaches to project education will be materially altered to place emphasis on clarification of purpose, and gaining an understanding and mastery of the activities needed to deliver project success.

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