A Philosophical Perspective of Project Management's Human Dimension

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Received: December 17, 2022 Accepted: January 13, 2023 Online Published: February 4, 2023

doi:10.5430/ijba.v14n1p1 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/ijba.v14n1p1

"The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next." ― Ursula K. Le Guin, The Left Hand of Darkness.

Abstract

This paper could be seen as an investigation of the theoretical foundations of Project Management, its nuances, and its relation to the Ethic of Care. Such an investigation is of great importance at the academic level as a basis of research, education, and understanding of the nuances inherent to Project Management. Therefore, grounded in ethical theories, this paper evaluates the importance of the project manager and team's knowledge of the organization's culture, the significance of managers or organizations nurturing and developing the project team, and how essential it is to the project's success of having managers focusing on technology while modulating its inherent human element thru Ethic of Care. Furthermore, this investigation analyzes the human side of Project Management by synthesizing its theories and concepts and evaluates the knowledge management and approach; it enhances our understanding of today's project managers' challenges to drive projects to succeed by applying the principles of the Virtue of care that could potentially improve project management.

Keywords: project management, ethics, ethics of care, the human element of project management, organizational culture, project teams

1. Design/Methodology/Approach

This investigation adopted the systematic reviews approach in which frequent searches and formal summaries of the literature are used to identify and classify the results of all primary studies on a particular topic, searching databases such as ProQuest, EBSCO, Emerald, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate to identify electronic journals and articles to elaborate and conclude. The search keywords were: The initial search identifies a sample of 30 research papers on project management using the keywords. Project Management, Organizational Culture, Developing the Project team, the Human Element of Project Management, etc., are included in the study.

Findings - Drawing from the available scholarly literature, this study found a direct relationship between the virtues of care, basic human needs, and the nurturing and development of project teams to procure their work satisfaction and happiness.

Research implications – This paper's epistemology positions implicitly or explicitly influence our thinking, beliefs, and justification. Hence, management researchers need to consider their thinking processes and help practitioners understand the roots of the project management's body of knowledge.

Practical implication – This paper provides guidance to researchers and practitioners from a new perspective on managing the human element of project management.

Originality/value – This study is innovative in proposing using some of the virtue of care to nurture and develop project teams and including the variables of context and circumstance into the equation of project managers' decision-making process.

2. Introduction

Culture, in general, is created through values, heroes, rites, rituals, and social communication networks (Lunenburg, 2011). In a more eloquent and philosophical context, Tharp (2009) referred to Culture as "the fabric of meaning in

which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action in an ordered system of meaning and symbols in which social interaction takes place." As managers become more focused on culture, claiming for guidance on "managing" culture, some researchers shifted their focus from the academic study of culture as an applied managerial tool (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). Though there are disagreements in the definition of organizational culture in the context of this study, organizational culture is described as a specific workgroup culture maintained through the socialization process by which individuals learn the values, norms, expected behaviors, and social knowledge necessary to assume their roles in the organization (Lunenburg, 2011) that become a shared belief. According to Lunenburg (2011), these shared beliefs shape how members think and behave. Lunenburg (2011) claimed that organizational theorists acknowledged that organizations have personalities just like people, exemplifying that organizations can be flexible, rigid, supportive, unfriendly, innovative, or conservative. Contrariwise, Tharp (2009) claimed that even though values play an undisputable role in organizational culture, other scholars claim that it is erroneous to credit values, which are inherently only individuals (humans), to a corporate entity or a group of individuals. Tharp (2009) suggested that such a position maintains that it is the value of a few particularly influential leaders to rally other employees and subsequently influence company behavior.

Regardless of whether organizational values reflect the standards of some influential individuals at the top of their organizational structure or if it exists as its own, the organization determines how to operate and when to change its operational mode, either at the corporate level or the project management level. Therefore, this investigation analyzes the human side of Project Management by synthesizing its theories and concepts and evaluates the knowledge-management approach to managing projects and improving their success.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Understanding Organizational Culture

Early debates or organizational culture were characterized by two powerful arguments rooted in the conception of the subject (Ogbonna, 1992). Based on the Burrell and Morgan (1979) paradigmatic framework, Ogbonna (1992) study identified two different approaches to Organizational Culture; the organization has culture, and the organization is culture. Ogbonna (1992) explained that when viewed as something an organization has, culture becomes a powerful organizational tool; it shapes the organization's member's behavior and gives them a sense of identity, establishing recognized and accepted premises for decision-making. On the other hand, for those who see culture as an organization, the concept is inseparable from the organization (organization is culture, and culture is an organization). Hence there is no point in regulating or controlling a phenomenon (Culture) entrenched in the organization's existence. Ogbonna (1992) literature review found that other researchers argued that culture "*simply*" exists and cannot be created or changed by individuals since no matter how much managers try, they cannot modify or manage the subconscious assumptions and values guiding peoples' behavior. A more contemporary definition of organizational culture stipulates that culture is the shared beliefs, assumptions, and values people learn from a group that guides or influences our behavior (Marchewka, 2015). Therefore, according to Marchewka (2015), culture can be created, changed, or maintained by implementing a formal system. But whatever the stance on the issue of managing culture (primitive or modern), it is undeniable that culture can have a pervasive effect on organizational outcomes.

3.2 Understanding Project Complexity

In extensive literature research considering complexity theories, Bakhshi, Ireland, and Gorod (2016) agreed on defining project complexity as an "intricate arrangement of the varied interrelated parts in which the elements can change and constantly evolve with an effect on the project objectives." Vidal and Marle (2008) literature review on project complexity found that project size, variety, interdependencies, interrelations within the project system, and context dependence could characterize project complexity. Though Vidal and Marle (2008) emphasized project interdependence as the factor most influential in project complexity; this study underlines that contextuality is an essential feature of complexity since it could be considered a common denominator of any complex system. Project complexity context-dependence underlines that "the context and practices that apply to one project are not directly transferable to other projects with different institutional and cultural configurations (Vidal & Marle, 2008). Bakhshi, Ireland, and Gorod (2016) further analyzed the contextuality element of simple and complex projects. Their study showed that in simple projects, context factors are direct since the need and expectation to complete the project are specific. However, the context of large projects resulted chaotically since the project needs and expectations fluctuated.

3.3 Managerial Ethical Decision-Making

Making decisions ethically is not an inconsequential matter since the outcome of those decisions can make a significant difference in the decision-maker's life and the lives of others affected by these decisions. Ethical—or unethical—decisions in a business context have wide-ranging implications since businesses involve many transactions and relationships (Woiceshyn, 2011) with many people. Marchewka (2015) defined an ethical leader as someone who demarcates the correct values and sends the right message to shape an ethical culture. Marchewka (2015) argued that *Unethical Leaders* are generally weak moral individuals, and Ethically Neutral Leaders tend to fail into a neutral category where they are neither strong nor weak leaders.

Woiceshyn (2011) described ethical decision-making as a rational process where people reason through moral dilemmas by applying moral principles or other criteria. In her literature review, (Woiceshyn, 2011) distinguishes three types of rational ethical decision-making models. Some "*rational"* models assume that managers engage in reasoning based on moral theories, such as deontology or utilitarianism (such as truth-telling as a duty, as per deontology, or benefit to the majority in utilitarianism). Other rational models that Woiceshyn (2011) found, stipulated that managers reason according to the stage of their moral development or based on rewards and sanctions rather than on moral theory. The third type of reasoning model is based on ''moral intensity'' where people respond to ethical issues based on differences in the consequences (impact on victims or beneficiaries). Woiceshyn (2011) proposed that integration by essentials is central to storing and retrieving knowledge and, thus, to effective decision-making. Though Woiceshyn. (2011) study is extensive, and her proposition of an effective, ethical decision-making process could be resumed by her argument that "knowledge is integrated into concepts and principles based on essences, the subconscious filing and retrieving of it will be fast and accurate, facilitating effective decision."

3.4 Understanding the Human Element of Project Management

Gillard (2017) argued that technology continuously evolves and changes project development and completion methods. Though projects will change in nature, scope, and context, the human elements do not change. Therefore, ethical behavior, consideration of others, principles of communication, and a drive for knowledge and excellence are unvarying elements. Gillard (2017) explained that Learning and practicing ways to optimize human interaction, build trust and confidence, and effectively communicate with project team members lead to more efficient and effective project development.

According to Ciccotti (2014), there are six basic human needs, regardless of upbringing, experiences, or education, that drive all people's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors on a conscious or unconscious level; and out of those six basic needs, every person has two (the driving needs) that filter every thought, action, and the decision that they make. Ciccotti (2014) claimed that people would do almost anything to satisfy these two needs. Ciccotti (2014) explained that every human's first need is *"certainty."* People want to feel safe, avoid pain, feel comfortable in their environment, and have a sense of security. The second need, according to Ciccotti. (2014) is *"variety."* Everyone needs challenges (variety) to exercise their emotional, physical, and intellectual range—the third needs Ciccotti. (2014) cited is for *"significance."* People need to feel important, unique, and worthy of attention and experience "*love and connection"* with others. Ciccotti (2014) emphasized that people also need "*growth"* because when individuals stop growing, they die. It is an imperative biological nature; thus, humans pursue to *"grow"* intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. And finally, the sixth *"need is for contribution,"* which means going beyond their needs to contribute beyond themselves and give to others because when people help, their problems disappear.

The human element of project management could be analyzed from two perspectives or dimensions: from the project deployment perspective and an economic perspective. Laplante (2003) argued that the human element is one of the most important but frequently overlooked aspects of managing IT projects. From the project deployment perspective Laplante (2003) cited John S. MacDonald's speech, stating that a project's success directly relates to the quality of talent employed and, more importantly, how management deploys talent on the project. From an economic perspective, IT project deployment has substantial implications for the labor market since the potential for automation could destroy or change the nature of existing jobs. But at the same time, there is considerable discussion about the potential for job creation through digital technologies (Randall & Berlina, 2019).

4. Discussion

4.1 Modulating the Inherent Human Element of Project Management

Marchewka (2015) defined a Moral leader as someone who establishes the right set of values and sends the right message to shape an ethical culture. To Marchewka (2015), unethical Leaders are generally weak moral individuals,

and ethically neutral leaders tend to fail in the neutral category, where they are neither strong nor weak. This concept is fundamentally absolutist in terms of morality and ethical decision-making. In this regard, Miner and Petocz (2003) found that ethical decision-making theories fail to accommodate the complexity and comprehensiveness of the processes and Brännmark and Sahlin (2010) argued that mainstream ethical theorizing proceeds on the assumption that ultimately there is, or should be, a single system of normative theory consisting of a set of one or more moral principles that applies across all human concerns. According to Brännmark and Sahlin (2010), the conventional ethical theories fail to acknowledge that human activities are too diverse and heterogeneous for such systematization. Based on this perspective, this study argued that ethical management, as presented in the available literature, could only work if fulfilled by rational thinkers (managers) independent of the world around them and disconnected from the means they employ to achieve their goals and the consequences of their decisions. But when put to the test in real-world scenarios (distinctive contexts and circumstances for every project) where their interdependence with their workplace environment and the outside world occurs, traditional ethical principles may not be best or possible to apply. From a consequential perspective, listening to and addressing the concern of every employee may not be the deed managers could realistically afford. From the deontology perspective, even managers with the best intention and who are ethically mature could face circumstances where it is impossible to act according to traditional ethic principles to achieve the best outcome. In this regard, Heagney (2016) considered project management to be the ultimate business paradox. Heagney (2016) argued that though the essential project tools never really change, the nuances of applying those tools for project success are constantly changing and adjusting for the new now.

Through various works, the philosopher Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher (Tronto, 2020) defined four out of six virtues of care that this study implies could be applied to ethical management as a how-to manual for a more mature managerial career (Attentiveness, Responsibility, Competence, and Responsiveness). Therefore, if managers do not possess "*attentiveness"* to identify their team members' driving human needs (Ciccotti, 2014) ignoring the voices of their group, they create a limitation for themselves that could turn the most dynamic geniuses with the most genuine intention into technicians that spend their career justifying a limited perspective. The second virtue of focusing on is responsibility. Knowing their team members' driving human needs and not having the "*responsibility*" to do something about it will not get managers very far in keeping good people. Therefore, cultivating a sense of "*responsibility"* is essential for managers and their team members that depend on their leader's decisions and actions. Listing to people, finding out their needs, and having the "*responsibility"* to act will not benefit the team if managers do not know how to do it. Managerial ethics is, therefore, consequential ethics, and managerial competence is a critical element for project success. Thus, "*Responsiveness"* will allow managers to be aware of the response they receive about their actions related to taking care of their team members' needs.

This study argues that incorporating the three virtues of care into the project manager's body of knowledge could help managers to build successful teams and become better leaders. This argument is consistent with Ciccotti (2014) claim that by knowing their people's needs, managers gain confidence & clarity in how to handle difficult people and situations more effectively, maintain control of their emotions and, learn to understand team members, and learn the most effective ways to lead teams and gain people's commitment to objectives without coercion. Ciccotti (2014) emphasized that thru this knowledge, managers could Eliminate self-doubt become rock-solid in handling conflict, create a roadmap to building sustainable teams, and have a profound impact on their teams and organization.

Therefore, based on the above discussion, this study suggests that applying the virtues of care to project management could mitigate the nuances of using their organizational and management tools and define a mixture of values and behaviors that guides people in shaping a corporate culture in the process that sees the human facet as important as the technological aspect of projects.

4.2 Importance of the Project Manager and Team's Understanding Organization's Culture

The main idea of culture comes from sharing in learning processes based on the systematic allocation of resources (Awadh & Alyahya, 2013); will be no better connoisseur of the organizational culture than those who help shape and refine it. Piwowar-Sulej (2021) research showed a linkage between the organizational culture and the project management methodology. Piwowar-Sulej (2021) found that organizational culture is the most critical factor determining the project management methodology used as the standard in organizations. This argument is consistent with Morrison *et al.* (2008) study that revealed that more than training in project management and a set of systems and techniques might be needed for project success. If the organization's culture is too bureaucratic and hierarchical, project management will hardly produce the results organizations hope for. To this end, knowing the organizational culture, managers, and teams could consolidate a set of diverse behavioral themes into a project management methodology that could gain the organization's supportiveness of project management.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides a brief review and a synthesis of conceptualization and investigation of the human element of project management. The author makes some preliminary observations about the ethic of care integrities applied to project management, which could be of value to management researchers, educators, and practitioners. This investigation also provides a preliminary analysis of two critical variables in the project management decision-making that revealed the paradoxical fundaments of project management that could become part of the standardization of the project management body of knowledge.

It is important to emphasize that this paper has an exploratory character. The approaches discussed in this paper aimed to sharpen our conceptual understanding of project management's human elements from a different perspective by prospecting for increasing awareness of ethical practices other than the ones considered in the available scholarly literature and MBA textbooks and their implications for practitioners, educators, and management researchers. In no way does the author intend to falsify current research results. However, the study of the epistemology of project management's human side led the author to conclude that integrating the virtues of care into project management could be an attractive footpath to analyzing other realities in the field.

6. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study conducted a holistic review of 30 journal articles on the theory of ethics of care and project management to introduce researchers and practitioners to a novel perspective on managing the human element of project management. Though it offers a new assessment of project management using philosophical theories, much work remains to be done; specifically, new theory development work and empirical research are necessary. Theoretical methods may assist in predicting the effectiveness of applying the theory of virtues of care to project management, but more empirical contributions are needed. As a conceptual paper, empirical studies on this framework should be necessary for researchers to discover details and evidence of the benefits of the ethics of care applied to Project Management. Additionally, identifying distinctive benefits realization context between the different industries with varying levels of project management maturity, such as information systems and service sectors. Therefore, it is suggested that future investigations be based on surveys rather than case studies since surveys are suitable for testing insights and hypotheses to develop new knowledge; otherwise, case studies are ideal for exploring and developing theories and hypotheses and are less suited for assessment.

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