

PROJECTS FOR LEARNING – A CASE STUDY

Rod Sarah & Tim Haslett

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Abstract

In order to remain competitive and survive, organisations must adapt to changes in their business environment. In this paper, we will argue that “learning” is central to success in today’s complex environment and a capability for learning is a strategic resource crucial for sustainable competitive advantage. Drawing on the practical experience of a mid-sized service organisation, the paper then provides a narrative account about how this organisation has instigated a Project Management approach aimed at organisational improvement through learning. It offers a conceptualisation of ‘project management for learning’ using the action research/action learning framework. It is this organisation’s experience that these innovations are part of developing a learning culture – a pre-condition for becoming a learning organisation.

This paper is a work in progress. Material in the paper cannot be used without permission of the author.

PROJECTS FOR LEARNING – A CASE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The language of 'projects' permeates modern society. In most major daily newspapers, there is reference to 'major projects' affecting civic and community infrastructure – whether roads, bridges, tunnels. Added to this the utility projects dedicated to water and power supply, military purchase and construction, as well as new product design in every industry, projects and project management is 'big business'. Recognising this, some Governments have appointed explicit ministerial responsibilities for 'major projects'¹.

The impact of projects has a huge effect on society and business. The number of person-hours, financial cost and resource utilisation dedicated to projects is of significant importance. And while scale and large numbers attract the attention of readers and subscribers of newspapers, the business impact of issues such as project delays, cost overruns and quality are of significant concern to managers since they affect the ability of organisations to meet customer needs, of government to deliver essential social and economic infrastructure, and of military to defend a nation.

In this paper, we describe the experience of a mid-sized service organisation based in the Tertiary Education Sector in Australia, and how it has introduced a Project Management approach to achieving organisational improvement. While not on the scale of multiple billions of dollars or of defending a nation, the success of this organisation is directly linked to its ability to support the education of approximately 40,000 students at one of Australia's largest Universities. "Monyx Projects" as this Project Management approach is known, has as a central feature the conceptualisation of 'project management for learning' using the action research and action learning framework. The approach outlined has been developed as part of an on-going Action Research study in the host organisation.

COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS – A SYSTEMS THINKING VIEW

Business organisations are complex entities, operating in complex environments. If we conceptualise these complex business organisations as systems, they operate within a supra-system – a complex business environment. They are also composed of many sub-systems, each of which in turn is composed of many individuals. The whole organisation's ability to remain viable and sustain itself, and therefore to act effectively in response to changing external circumstances, depends on the creation of a set of shared protocols and routines that cut across these subsystems. Somewhat paradoxically, these protocols and routines must be sustainable in the face of changes to individual membership of the subsystems. These shared protocols and routines are a critical element of an infrastructure for success and are frequently referred to an organisation's culture (Schein, 1992).

In this conceptualisation, culture is crucial to how an organisation aligns or integrates the various subsystems and their subcultures. Ongoing sustainability depends on the ability to diffuse core elements of its shared assumptions and values as culture.

In our case study organisation, Monyx Services Pty Ltd has established a set of governing ideas and organisational values as foundational elements of its aforementioned infrastructure. These are reproduced below as Figure 1.

¹ The Victorian State Government in Australia has a Minister for Major Projects. The projects are clustered into groups such as Arts and Culture, Development and Construction, Sports and Recreation, Transport, and Innovation and Investment. The commercial value of these is in excess of \$10Billion (see <www.majorprojects.vic.gov.au>: last accessed 7 July 2004).

Leveraging these foundational elements of organisational infrastructure, the host organisation of this study has developed and implemented a Project Management protocol and practice grounded on the principle and value of learning. Its experience with the introduction of this protocol during the April 2003 to June 2004 period is reported in this paper. Conceptualised as ‘project management for learning,’ we report on three cycles of projects as three learning cycles, and therefore represent project management as a cyclic and iterative process rather than a linear and deterministic process.

Figure 1: Monyx Governing Ideas and Values²

<i>Governing Ideas</i>	<i>Organisational Values</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pursuit of Service Excellence • Increasing Self Reliance in both financial and operating terms • Student Development from co-curricular activities and real life learning • Building Community • Striving for continuous improvement as a Learning Organisation • Enhancing the Monash Experience and the University’s Reputation • Achieving and maintaining Market Competitiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrity • Service • Community • Teamwork • Sustainability • Learning

PROJECTS, LEARNING AND PROJECT LEARNING

The literatures on projects and project management are extensive, as is the literatures on learning in organisations and organisational learning. Both literatures have long histories, with accompanying scholarly publications. From the perspective of Systems Thinking, projects and project management applications stem from the Operations Research field developed during the Second World War. Using efficiency techniques anchored in the hard systems sciences, practices of critical path method (CPM) and path evaluation and review technique (PERT) remain popular project management tools as business moves into the 21st Century.

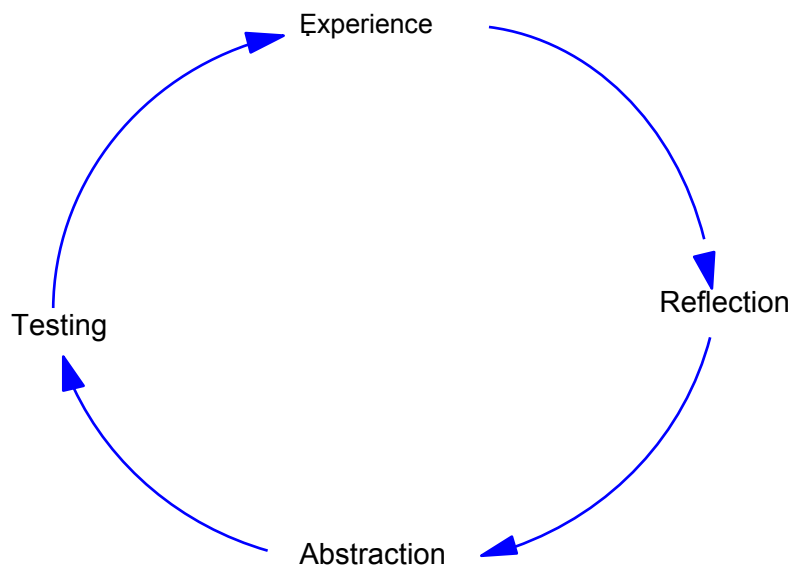
While a contemporary interest in learning in organisations largely stems from Senge’s concept of a ‘learning organisation’ (Senge, 1990), this embracement of learning in organisations is also not new. While much of the literature links back to the original work of Lewin in the social sciences field and his development of action research, when he argued that action and theory are in a constant interaction (Lewin, 1946). Much of the more recent publications of learning in organisations and organisational learning is now over a quarter of a decade old. The ideas of Bateson (1973) first proposed there are different levels of learning, while 25 years ago Argyris and Schon were exploring ways in which organisations learn (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Their explicit suggestion, now over 20 years old, is that learning is the result of cycles of activity where experience of data is disconfirming and that disconfirmation focuses on processing and interpreting that data, leading to revised action (Kolb, 1984).

Kolb’s learning cycle, represented in Figure 2, integrates the practical doing with generalisable theorising in a continuous cycle, and is arguably the basis of frameworks used in many texts on action learning (Weinstein, 1995), action research (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001) and action

² Source: The Monyx Values. Internal organisational publication <<http://www.intranet.monyx.com/about/values.html>> last accessed 2/7/2004. Available from the Primary Author.

learning (Dixon, 1994, Garratt, 1987, 1987, Kim, 1993, Pedler et al., 1991, Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1992).

Figure 2: Kolb Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984, Weinstein, 1995)



The other theme enduring through the writings on learning, in addition to the concept of cycles of learning, is that of types of learning. The organisational learning literature refers to two different types of learning.

The first is referred to as 'adaptive learning' (Senge, 1990). Organisations become more efficient by making improvements and amendments to systems and processes, but within an existing frame of reference or mental model. This is where efficiency and speed, in the form of routines as capability, provide organisational leverage and contribute to competitive advantage.

The second type of learning that Senge (op cit) refers to is generative learning. In this mode of learning, organisations develop new perspectives, options and possibilities and frames of reference or frameworks of ideas (Checkland, 1985).

Other authors also suggest a distinction between these two forms of learning but using different labels – "single-loop learning" and "double-loop learning", where the second is conceptualised as a change in a "frame of reference" or "governing variables (Argyris, 1999, Argyris and Schon, 1978)." The work of Argyris is influenced heavily by the originating work of Bateson over 30 years ago (Bateson, 1973).

The above authors suggest that organisational learning is thus a systemic phenomenon, with Senge arguing that systems thinking and practice is the key to organisational learning (Senge, 1990). Organisations are viewed as open systems (Emery and Trist, 1965, Emery, 1993, Katz and Khan, 1978): that the organisation is a configuration of elements that transform inputs into outputs, and is influenced by the external environment. Therefore, an organisations ability to learn depends on its degree of openness. Its ability to detect disconfirming information in the both external and internal environments, and to act on this while managing the systemic implications, is a learning challenge. And as proposed earlier in this paper, for organisations as a system to learn, all the component sub-systems must similarly be able to learn through a set of shared protocols and routines – referred to as organisational capabilities - that cut across these sub-systems.

In the practical world of business organisations, a benefit of managing a structure of projects is that it enables organisational members to have a focus on something that is real and important. Projects provide a reference to which to link learning and test pre-existing knowledge. They also provide a metric against which to measure your learning (Weinstein, 1995).

West and Stansfield (2001), in describing the management of IT projects, give a detailed explanation and justification of Checkland's FMA as a means to position action research as a learning focused approach. They also provide a thorough overview of the rigour and legitimacy of adopting Checkland's FMA model (West and Stansfield, 2001). Our experience is that the action research FMA model can be applied to other areas of business application beyond IT projects.

PROJECTS AS A PRACTICAL TOOL FOR BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Projects are a comfortable artefact for organisations, and as mentioned elsewhere provide a number of advantages for generating workplace learning, including focus and measurement (Weinstein, 1995). People and organisations, in general, prefer what is known or predictable, whether real or perceived. A great deal of effort goes into predicting the future and attempting to bring the future into being. Yet, we also acknowledge that the most substantial changes in history come as a surprise. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990 and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York are arguably the two most significant events that have changed the shape of the globe, and both these took the 'experts' by surprise. Yet despite this evidence, people and organisations believe the future is knowable. In daily organisational practices, this translates into have a desired intent that can be brought into existence by careful management. And a favoured management approach is in the use of projects and project management methodology.

Traditional project management implies linear cause and effect logics and what we'll refer to in this paper as 'linear planning' concepts – that there were specific outcomes, milestones, objectives etc. It is somewhat positivist in its orientation – that by controlling several key variables reliably we can predict the outcome we want to achieve. It assumes there is precise and perfect knowledge available in advance of the project commencing, and the challenge is a technical one of successfully planning, scheduling, resourcing, and controlling to achieve these predetermined outcomes. Any unexpected (and/or unplanned) development, questioning or learning tends to be seen as a 'variation from the plan.' It is seen as a time and cost over-run, or as a variation on specification requiring rework. Any disconfirming data is acted upon with 'corrective orientation' to get back on plan. This approach focuses on 'single-loop learning' (Argyris, 1999, Argyris and Schon, 1978) or 'adaptive learning' (Senge, 1990).

This creates a tension within a 'learning mindset' of emergence. With this orientation, you start with a "loose idea" that allows for outcomes to unfold and reveal themselves through cycles of action and reflection within a dynamic context. Rather than the future being known and then action taken as a comparison against plan, with variations to be eliminated and corrected, this alternate learning orientation suggests that projects deliver results in the form of disconfirming data that inturn needs to be interpreted.

With this initial tension between the theories and approaches of action learning (and action research) and the traditional project management paradigm, the project member has to acknowledge the context that they are operating in, and accommodate the inherent tension. We now explore this tension further.

CYCLING WITHIN A LINEAR VIEW OF THE WORLD

The metaphor of the 'cycles' of learning suggests that you are always in the middle of something without a formal beginning or ending. However, this creates the potential for an initial dilemma for

the project member. For a project, there must be a beginning and an ending – albeit an arbitrary beginning and an arbitrary end.

In this initial period of Monyx Projects, we continued to struggle with the challenge of making sense of our limited understandings of our situations. Yet, we intuitively knew that as an action learner/researcher, you always start in the middle of something if you view the world as continuous. Wherever you start and however you conceptualise the beginning of projects, it is helpful to conceptualise the work in terms that the reflective learning cycles helping to readjust direction, and that this emergence is the natural outcome of taking action.

Consistent with this reflection, the early pressures regarding “starts” and “finishes” is now accommodated much more comfortably as the project mindset has evolved. The formal adoption of evaluation and reflection frameworks, and specifically the explicit need to revisit our assumptions, provides the opportunity for deeper learning. Making the shift and maintaining the shift from ‘starts and finishes’ to ‘journeys’ difficult because organisations need them.

LEARNING: A GUIDING IDEA AND ORGANISATIONAL VALUE

The organisational mindset traditionally views the world as though the future is knowable, and therefore we can predict and plan with a degree of certainty. as “projects”, with associated goals, project plans and milestones. However, and as stated in the Monyx governing ideas and values (Figure 1), organisational learning and learning organisations offer a different mindset... one akin to uncertainty and unpredictability. Rather than predictable and knowable, the future is unknown and unknowable (Flood, 1999).

Thus, a challenge for project management and the project member is to reconcile the ‘project mindset’ with a ‘learning mindset.’ We needed to reconfigure our thinking of longer projects into short cycles, where project members and their organisations are aiming to discover and understand the process, method and content of each action cycle. In this configuration, the outcome is not about achieving targets, goals and deadlines; the outcomes are essentially emergent as project teams and their members learn their way forward into the future.

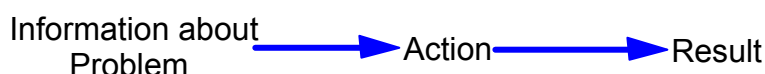
The above examples notwithstanding, when beginning what is a cyclic process of project management within a somewhat linear mindset and worldview, the project member must be pragmatic. The next section of this paper continues the exploring the pragmatic issues of conducting projects for learning.

FROM LINEAR PROJECT MANAGEMENT TO CYCLIC LEARNING

In the world of business, organisations and their managers are concerned about achieving results. For example, the work we do in organisations involves taking action with the intent of achieving a result that is deemed important.

Much of the decision making in organisations implies a structure such that managers have some information about a problem or issue (Forrester, 1992). Based on that information, managers take action and achieve a desired result. Diagrammatically, this can be represented as a logical linear process:

Figure 3: Open-loop Impression of the World (Forrester, 1992)



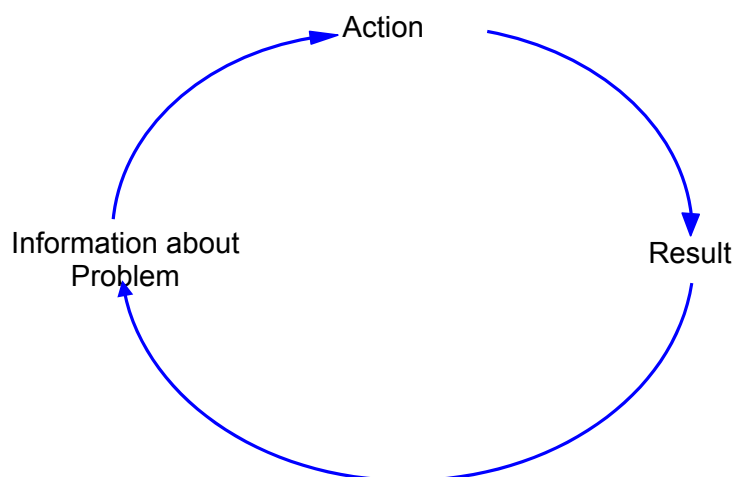
In this representation of organisational action, a manager has a problem to solve, and based on the available information about the problem, takes action and solves it. However, too frequently managers delude themselves by using this linear mental model. We live in an on-going dynamic world in which each action is based on the current information we have. Taking action and achieving a result however provides a source of new information, that then becomes the basis of future decision-making about what actions we will take. Forrester (op cit) refers this to a Closed-loop Structure of the World (see Figure 4).

In this 'view of the world', there are not beginnings or endings rather there are on-going cycles. People are interconnected and interdependent, locked together in a web of mutual causality, continually reacting to their past actions and the past actions of others.

Therefore, we are suggesting work is a constant learning process of moving around a cycle – and while the labels in Forrester's Figure 4 are different from those in Figure 2, that cycle reflects the Kolb principles. The crucial issue is that learning is directly related to doing the work – there is no actual or artificial split between 'learning in a class room' and 'doing on the job'. Action and learning are integrated and interdependent.

In the remainder of the paper, we provide a narrative account that describes how 'projects for learning' has been implemented in our Case Study organisation.

Figure 4: Closed-loop Structure of the World (Forrester, 1992)



PROJECTS IN MONYX

While the case study element of this paper is the period April 2003 to June 2004, Monyx and its predecessor organisation has a long history with Projects stretching back to 1997. It is this history that provides important background context and also highlights the point we have already made that 'starts' and 'finishes' are somewhat arbitrary. With a continuous worldview, you always start in the middle of something. We will now set out this context from 1997. This period is analysed in three parts: 1997-2000, 2001-2002, and 2003-2004.

1997- 2000: As part of an organisational improvement initiative labelled the "Monsu Service Strategy" implemented in 1997-1998, Monyx's prior organisation introduced a 'project approach' to developing a customer service focus. This initial foray into projects embraced the whole of the organisation. In interviewing for this paper, a comment was provided that this early enthusiasm toward customer service and service quality exceeded the organisations capability to deliver timely results. In its early enthusiasm, implemented under the project name of *Operation David*, there were a total of 52 nominated projects, spread across approximately 30 full-time staff, plus a smaller

number of permanent part-time staff, together with a larger casual workforce. While perceived as a quantity issue, the recent reflection is that there was not a sufficient organisational project infrastructure to support these projects. This learning proved critical and fed into the next project activity.

During 1999-2000, a second iteration of 18 projects named *Operation Starman*, was initiated under the 'Service Is Everything' theme. This round of what were far more focused projects yielded significant results for the organisation, and established the platform for an application in 1999 for Australian Customer Satisfaction Association (ACSA), winning a State award that year, and winning both a State level award and a High Commendation rating in the National Awards in 2000. As an initiative, conducting projects had yielded significant organisational improvements.

2001-2002: In 2001, in preparation for an organisational amalgamation within the University setting, another round of projects was initiated. This time however, the improvement related to an organisational restructuring and amalgamation. The focus of these projects, still under the context of 'service,' was preparing for a merger and subsequent integration of two organisations into the new entity, Monyx. The strategic intent this time was to focus on organisational readiness and enabling the new organisation to come together more effectively. based on the experience of prior projects across 1997-2000, the new organisation believed that the projects would deliver this shift and create a sense of readiness.

Topics included Communication, Student Development, Training and Development, Systems Thinking, as well as a project to develop a set of Values to support a set of Governing Ideas already established for the new organisation (see Figure 1).

Data gathered in preparing this paper revealed several important issues on the conduct of projects:

- In the environment of building a new organisation, with high staff member anxiety regarding job security (despite a guarantee from the University and those leading the creation of the new organisation that there would be no job losses – which there were not), the results were nowhere near what had been achieved during 1999 and 2000.
- In addition to there being too much 'other stuff' in the environment, there was not an organisational infrastructure established to support and nurture the projects through this transition period.
- The membership of the 2001 projects included a range of 'new' project members who had not previously been involved in any 'project work'. This revealed people's need to develop a capability for project work – let alone 'project work for learning.'
- Related to the above point, in comparison to the earlier projects where all members volunteered, while the 2001 projects were also on a volunteer basis, there existed some pressure that 'new people' brought upon themselves to volunteer to be seen to be doing the right thing. It should be noted that this is not a widespread reported reaction, since several of the 'new people' reported this as a terrific experience.
- Membership of the new teams was deliberately cross-functional. There was a deliberate attempt to mix and gain increased diversity of membership. It was believed this would generate novelty and creativity and generate unique insights. The reflection was that despite the desirability of mixed membership, the process needed to be facilitated.

2003-2004: During the 2002 year, the language of 'projects' was not centre-stage in Monyx since the focus was on creating the new organisation. Following that initial 12 months, where the focus centred on building a new executive leadership team, a focus on projects re-emerged in 2003. Following an executive planning retreat in early 2003, the status on several key organisational issues revealed that after a twelve month period, 8 strategic issues remained outstanding, including four from the previous year. The collective assessment of the executive leadership team

was that while the new organisation was enthusiastic about future possibilities, it however lacked the corresponding finishing capacity to match its enthusiasm for beginning new initiatives.

The diagnosis concluded that without significant intervention, there was high risk of these 8 issues would fail to deliver the outcomes expected by the end of 2003, with related down-stream flow-on consequences.

In April 2003, eight Critical Projects were launched, to run within a 90-day cycle over the May to July period. Project teams were formed that were to scope their deliverables within that timeframe and report back within one month to a collective whole of project team forum, that would include members of the executive leadership team. To add focus and credibility to the importance of these 8 projects, they were deliberately labelled 'critical' – critical to the organisation's immediate success and critical in that all other initiatives would take a secondary role over this period. A label that some used at this time is 'drop-dead projects' – the failure to deliver outcomes could result in putting the new organisation at risk. Additionally, members of the executive leadership team would pair-up and work as members within each of the 8 projects. This was thought to not only add expertise, but reinforce the organisational criticality of the projects, and also the priority and therefore legitimacy of the projects within the organisation.

These projects had their first report back review at the end of May 2003, and second one at the end of June, and a final report in August. Several interesting learnings occurred during this initial round of projects over this 90-day period:

- After the first 30 days, and again after the second 30 days, each project had elements of its project scope modified. Specifically, the deliverables were reduced. Again in its enthusiasm, Monyx had overpromised in its project scoping and faced the risk of under-delivering. The analogy of picking 'low-hanging fruit' and 'quick-wins' was introduced to the language of project management in Monyx in this early period.
- The concept of 'Critical Projects' consumed the new organisation, many new to the idea of a formal project approach. Some have since reflected that so all-consuming was this experience that the project structure dominated the organisations 'operational structure'. There existed a dichotomous mindset: you were either doing projects or you were doing operational work as specified in the business plan. Yet the strategic intention was the projects were created to supplement business plan functions and to give focus on those activities that were lagging, not instead of them.
- While a former incarnation of the organisation had significant projects experience, this new organisation contained almost 300 permanent full-time staff in comparison to the approximate 30 back in 1997. While the experience was distributed throughout many of the project teams, the learning was that working as project teams takes time.
- While an explicit learning label didn't exist, the concept of 'projects for learning' was implicit within key organisational members who conceived the project infrastructure. Each team, as well as dealing with the content issues and deliverables of their projects, was asked to record and document team processes. The project review meetings at the end of May and end of June 2003 were focussed on 'learning.' The tools of evaluation for learning (Mezirow, 1991) and reflection using dialogue techniques (Bohm, 1996, Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, Isaccs, 1999) and a framework developed from the work on After-Action Reviews (Darling and Parry, 2001) informed the approach used. These came from other work that had occurred during the 2002 period in which executive team development with team learning (Senge, 1990) was the organisational priority.
- Out of the explicit evaluation of the projects to focus on not only deliverable content outcomes but also the process of conducting these projects, several learnings emerged that were summarised in a 'Guide for Monyx Projects'. This included such elements as establish team protocols, team roles that reflected individual team member's preferences or skill sets, and

regular meeting practices. In most cases, the project teams that achieved more and learnt more as revealed in the reflections were those who met regularly – some met weekly while others came together less frequently, albeit regularly.

- The finding was that the length of project cycles needs to pace organisational cycles. Initially, the 90 days was too long for projects to operate since they cut across critical organisational cycles. It was recommended that the next cycle of projects be 60 days: this timeframe was felt to reflect the more natural cycle times that existed in the organisation's task environment. Another key finding from these first cycle of projects was a recommendation for future projects there be overlapping membership from this first round of critical projects to the next cycle. The opportunity for some new formal membership would address the perception of some that membership of 'critical projects' was a recognition of your perceived value in the organisation, and exclusion implied you were on the 'outer'. As well, with overlapping membership, the experiences of the first group could more easily be able to be transferred to the new project teams.
- The label 'critical' should be removed from what was to become a Round 2 'Monyx Projects' to deal with the unintended consequence of exclusivity.

In September 2003, a second round of projects was established. This round was expected to implement the learnings from the critical projects, complete a progress report at the end of September, conclude by end October 2003, and report in November 2003.

This second round of 'Monyx Projects' confirmed much of the learnings of the initial 'critical projects'. The language of critical projects however remained an issue for some others in the organisation. The critical nature of the first round of projects had created an expectation that there would be critical projects: some organisational members were recorded as asking project team members whether these were 'critical' projects.

However, these Round 2 projects enjoyed significant success. The project framework had permeated the whole organisation. This had created an organisational environment and container where these projects could flourish and be nurtured. The 'Guidelines for Monyx Projects' created an infrastructure of sponsors, leaders, and monthly reflection sessions to report learnings and progress all added to establishing projects for learning as a core element for organisational life. Additionally, during this second round of projects, there was a different and more sustainable approach that saw projects supporting the operational and strategic work specified in the business plans.

Some reflections from the Round 2 projects included:

- Reporting was delayed one month until early December 2003 for operational reasons associated with the cyclic time of the business year. One project team reported in January 2004.
- While the reporting and presentation of the project teams was later than planned, the ideal project cycle time was confirmed as needing to match organisational cycles. Not only did it match the time cycle in the organisations environment, it also meet individual needs of members who had project work added to their other operational work load, albeit that these second round 'Monyx Projects' were created to focus on operational work that was under threat of not being completed on time.
- Teams found the 'Guidelines for Monyx Projects' an appropriate tool that reflected the culture of the organisation. However, the process learnings included some enhancement recommendations – specifically, that diagnostic instruments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Instrument and the Belbin Team Roles Instrument should be used to alert project team members to particular dynamics. Additionally, a working practice in the art of dialogue needed to exist in the teams as an aid to their operations.

- Group Dynamics instruments such as outlined above, supplemented with dialogue skills, complimented the organisations intent of overlapping and rotating team membership, and also cross-functional membership as an explicit means of mixing and diversity for creativity and novelty. This was designed to future reinforce and diffuse the culture in a consistent and uniform way out into the still relatively new organisation.
- Complimenting the Group Dynamic tools, personal development in the area of self-awareness and emotional intelligence were identified as other tools to explore to enhance project team performance. (As this paper is being prepared, a personal mastery initiative is being piloted within an action learning project being conducted in the second half of 2004.)

As Monyx moved into 2004, the learnings of these first 2 rounds of projects were fed into a Round 3 set of Projects. However, these projects now have a different focus. There has been a deliberate move to 'de-emphasise' the Round 3 projects as different from business as usual. The Round 3 projects have much less a profile than Round 2 – notwithstanding their legitimacy and focus by the senior Leadership Teams – and now don't even have the status of 'Round 3'. There are three existing whole of organisational projects continuing and that is the way they are identified – one on financial reporting, one on finance system redevelopment, and one on a Monyx Service Strategy. They are Monyx Projects with a corporate priority. The organisation is equally interested in learning about how the content outcomes were delivered, the processes followed to achieve these outcomes, including project team dynamics and mechanics, as well as how our thinking about projects and how they should be conducted has been enhanced.

Additionally, the experiences of the 2003 projects have informed a Leadership Team Review in February 2004. Much of the content in the 'Guidelines for Monyx Projects' formed the basis on a 'Guidelines for Monyx Leadership Teams' document and process. Explicitly, each of these Leadership Teams were required to identify and specify 'innovation projects' within their own businesses, but again embracing the guidelines and learnings from the first Rounds of Projects.

Significantly, there has been further piloting and trailing of modifications to the guidelines whereby 'projects for learning' are informing further learning. For example, two separate sub-projects have experimented with different cycle times to reflect the unique context of the business settings. One back-of-office administrative service group has implemented a 90-day cycle, while a front-of-line direct service delivery area has successfully implemented a 30-day cycle. In both instances, the project teams consisted of a mix of experienced and new to projects staff as a part of establishing principals and protocols and routines that transcend individual members.

While some in the organisation suggest that this individual project innovation adds instability into an already complex business situation, others argue that it is the true essence of a 'projects for learning orientation', where our experiences and subsequent insights and reflections create opportunities for further learnings. The organisational jury is still out on this point, and the literature best describes this as a dilemma (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2001).

This is ongoing work-in-progress, due to be reported on internally and evaluated at an internal Learning Conference in November 2004.

CONCLUSION

Projects are such a natural and integrated part of the way humans interact in organisations that it is not surprising how a 'project orientation' has permeated into every aspect of our daily organisational (and personal) life. We are arguably living our lives through projects – whether we are conscious of this or not. How projects have become ingrained in organisational life can be explained as one attempt to deal with the complexity of modern life. Drawing on experiences involved in the introduction a 'projects for learning approach' in a service organisation, we have argued to challenge the singular current traditions of project management associated with

'designed' outcomes – of outcomes predicated on predictability, certainty and therefore 'knowability.'

We have demonstrated the centrality of the challenges of diffusion of learning to create a learning organisation are cultural and how the Monyx Projects, in their evolving format have assisted the overall change process by introducing shared protocols and routines, and the associated language, that can cut across the organisation and its component subsystems. For this new learning culture to flourish requires a protective container within a supportive organisational climate of inquiry and exploration such that organisations, and the projects that they run, can learn their way forward into what is a unpredictable, uncertain and unknown future.

As reported in this Case Study, at least one organisation has had success in achieving organisational improvements through projects for learning – by the simultaneous achievement of improvements and innovation, that has supported and is supported by a learning culture. The path lays ahead for others to follow...³

³ The authors acknowledge the support of the host organisation in preparing this paper and specifically the contributions of a number of organisational members in providing comments on an early draft of this paper.

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