Chapter 11

Getting to Grips with Behavioural Bias: How Projects Fail and What To Do About It

Geoff Trickey
Psychological Consultancy Limited, UK

ABSTRACT

The author discusses whether the impressive progress achieved by technical advances in project management have been stalled by failure to make similar advances in addressing the Human Factors. This imbalance may, he believes, be contributing to challenges being widely experienced in dealing with a residual ‘rump’ of workplace safety incidents, for example. He argues that ever tightening the controls and micro-managing workplace behaviour or pursuing zero safety incidents can be counterproductive both for compliance and for the bottom line. Professional, regulatory and standards bodies increasingly emphasise the importance of employee participation and risk leadership in achieving the mutual trust and respect necessary for objectives to be fully realised. He advises that project managers need to appreciate distinctive and deeply rooted individual differences in the behavioural dispositions of individual employees and proposes that readily available assessment techniques that address these issues should be added to their toolkit.

INTRODUCTION

People Issues

There are inevitably people you get along with and others that you don’t. Some that you have to get along with; your boss, colleagues in your team, and even members of your family; you will make the effort and you will find a way to jog along and keep the relationship viable – because you have to. The difference in the quality, effectiveness and fruitfulness of those relationships will be considerable. Being with someone you are easy with, whether in a work context, socially or in a relationship, is motivating, rewarding and requires little effort. Working with someone who irritates you, frustrates you, is difficult.
to communicate with and who you just don’t “get” where they’re coming from – that requires a lot of effort - sometimes too much and you blow it.

In project management terms, these dynamics will be very significant. The problem is that these ‘human factors’ are not easy to get to grips with. Dealing with disputes, unacceptable behaviours, poor performance, unreliability and the complexities of relationships and team dynamics is unlikely to be what you got into project management for. My guess is that many or even most project managers are more comfortable dealing with the technical side of things;

- The processes, procedures and systems that define what and how people will contribute,
- How they will communicate and collaborate,
- How the various strands of the project will come together to achieve the desired solution.

This ‘project architecture’ is emotionally neutral. It can be defined in detail and turned into systems, organisational diagrams and flow charts. Project management has embraced many systematic approaches from the wider field of management methods such as Lean, Agile and Sixth-sigma. It is logical, rational and dependable; all the things that individuals cannot be relied upon to be.

The debate about the relative merits of the technical approach to risk management and what has been referred to variously as the social, cultural, human factors or psychometric approach, goes back a long way. I quote here from a paper written in 1989; “Improved technical analyses are not the key to improved risk management and risk communication decisions” (Bradbury, 1989) and, more recently “high levels of employee consultation are associated with lower levels of injuries, near misses and stress” (Fidderman & McDonnell, 2010). The inevitability of human factors as an important consideration in project management derives from the impossibility of maximising risk management and project objectives solely on the basis of technical know-how (Annual Report of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, 2014).

Risk evaluation is always to a greater or lesser extent subjective. Right now, the idea of riding a 10-foot-high monocycle while juggling flaming torches will seem extremely dangerous. If, however, for the next two weeks, you devoted yourself entirely to mastering a regular size monocycle, which you could, you would see that riding the 10-foot version was challenging maybe, but not impossible. As to the juggling with flaming torches, we’ll deal with that when we get there! What seems a risk to one person may seem exciting to another. Circuses depend for their living on the difference between what looks dangerous to the audience but doesn’t look dangerous to the performer. In professional life, the same disagreements about what is and isn’t viable interfere with project management, impede relationships and can even create dissention and dispute.

At every level, risk evaluation relies on personal judgement to a greater or lesser degree. From the design of algorithms used in automated financial trading through to the decisions of underwriters and the calculations of actuaries, personal judgement always plays its part. This is also likely to be the case for risk and project management; “risk failures are mostly attributable to human factors” (Mazarr, 2016).

Psychology too has not always come clean about the subjectivity of its theorising. Both disciplines may have to give ground in order to find pragmatic ways of delivering, wherever possible, at the level of certainty that is available, realistic and useful. The big question then is; how can we square the circle? How do you achieve the necessary dialogue between the technical and personal aspects of project management? How can any significant developments in risk psychology be exploited in a systems oriented profession?