

Executive Summary

The global importance of projects is increasing while the environment in which projects are selected, shaped, designed and delivered is becoming significantly more challenging. It is imperative that project leadership adapts to this changing context if projects are to deliver their envisioned outcomes and value.

This report argues that a fundamental paradigm shift is needed in how project leaders understand projects if they are to develop and sustain these capabilities and truly adapt to the challenging environments that they face. This paradigm shift requires project leaders to be able to extend across three distinct visions of projects that reveal increasing layers of complexity: project-as-asset, project-as-system, and project-as-conversation. These visions require an increasing emotional and cognitive capacity to act from a corresponding logic as Expert, Achiever or Strategist:

- A project-as-asset vision focuses on the obvious characteristics of the 'thing' that the project is meant to deliver. The corresponding action logic is that of an Expert where the leader is called upon to provide expertise in relation to the asset.
- A project-as-system vision highlights the broad dynamics of the system in which the asset sits and the system that will deliver it. The corresponding action logic is that of an Achiever where the leader is expected to get it done.
- A project-as conversation vision emphasises the ongoing dialogue that occurs in relation to the project and that shapes what meaning people give it or how they respond emotionally to the project. The corresponding action logic is that of a Strategist where the leader uses a deep awareness of what drives human behaviour and the broader strategic purpose of the project to negotiate success.

The game changer in large scale complex projects is the leaders' ability to see projects not just as assets or systems but also as conversations and act from a Strategist logic. This report draws on insights from Roundtable participants to describe what this means across key areas of project leadership.

Reframing stakeholder interactions: A fundamental reframing is critical and must consider the need for early and deliberate trust-building and harnessing the opportunity of social media. It also requires a dynamic view of stakeholder networks and involvement of project team members that can only be achieved by building a stakeholder-centric mindset and culture.

A project-as-conversation perspective and strategist action logic provide a strong foundation for reframing: a good conversation requires being present to the other person; listening; engagement; being aware and empathetic to the context, interests, fears and power of a stakeholder; and can be conducted using a range of media. All of these elements are critical to stakeholder-centricity and will help a project leader see what dynamics need to be navigated to work towards a broad perspective of value and a bigger strategic purpose.

Digital transformation: Project management, like any other professional domain, will be disrupted by digital technology. To capitalise on these developments, we must identify Industry 4.0 'design principles' that help improve how we deliver successful complex projects.

Project managers who operate from an Achiever action logic are likely to pragmatically adopt any technologies that will assist to 'get the job done' better, faster and with less risk. However, Strategists will be less constrained and more likely able to consider how technology may change the game altogether.

Considering the human side: Participants in the Roundtable dialogues identified the human-to-human aspects of projects as the toughest challenges of complex project leadership and suggested a need for agility, working with resistance, inspiring others, adapting to context, being self-aware, and understanding how we are authors of our own reality.

A project-as-conversation perspective adds a layer of awareness of relational dynamics, what interests and fears lie underneath public positions, and an understanding of how people's personal styles or preferences (including their own) influence what meaning is attributed to the actions of other stakeholders in a project. A skilful Strategist can use this insight to shape both the cognitive meaning-making and emotional response through inspiration and vision.

Building high performance project teams: Key insights from the Roundtable dialogues include the importance of getting the team off to a good start, nurturing a healthy and sustainable work culture, a collaborative culture that is underpinned by contracts that support the desired culture, and create an inclusive and motivating team narrative.

A project-as-conversation perspective foregrounds the subtle dynamics at play, for example in balancing a culture where the team goes the extra mile without creating a brutal and unsustainable, non-inclusive culture. Similarly, it shows how a team makes sense of a project's journey. To skilfully act as a Strategist may require a reshaping of the bigger system in which the team sits. It may require taking multiple perspectives to see how to get the work done without burning out the team. And it may require judgement calls in the face of cognitive and emotional ambiguity and uncertainty.

Re-imagining governance: Governance must be re-imagined to avoid the pretence that higher certainty can be imposed on a project in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) context than is actually possible. Part of this involves seeing the clarification of purpose, planned outcomes, benefits and priorities as sense-giving activities of the project. This broadens the relationship with a project team to assess and maintain alignment of purpose on an ongoing 'sense-and-respond' basis. This moves governance beyond compliance and involves consideration of ethical and societal expectations, differentiating a 'do right project' from a 'do project right' mindset.

These shifts relate to acting as a Strategist focused on orchestrating strategic conversations across relevant stakeholders, sense-making, seeing bigger pictures, creating a context for success, and seeing such success from a broader benefits and outcome realisation perspective.

Negotiating project success: A traditional view of project success that is limited to quality, cost, and time, creates an overly narrow evaluation of success. However, the selection of broader success measures can be highly political, particularly for complex public projects. As a result, a leader of complex projects must be able to align or balance the needs of multiple stakeholders with varied expectations. Also, the absence of simple and objective indicators of success means that project success is negotiated in the stakeholders' discourse.

A Strategist would expect a fair amount of reshaping or re-baselining of a project along broader success measures and orchestrate a conversation with stakeholders to ensure they come along on that journey. While there is no disregard for budgets, timelines or quality, their focus is on how these affect the conversation regarding a project's success, particularly what it means for the perceived contribution to a broader strategic purpose or social good.

