

Situational Project Management
The Dynamics of Success and Failure
By Oliver F. Lehmann
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMM)

The views expressed in this article are strictly those of Max Wideman.
 The contents of the book under review are the copyright property of the author.
 Published here June, 2018

Introduction

"This book is about situational intelligence in project management, and a careful or even doubtful use of assumptions and interpretations is a central element of any situational approach."¹ So says our author Oliver Lehmann. Indeed, in his Preface he states:

"Project Management practices are often inexpensive excuses [for]:

- 'No, we will not accept the change request. It may bring benefits, but it is not in the plan or strategy.' [Or]
- 'No, we do not have a plan and we will not waste time documenting the project. We are going Agile.' [!]"²

Oliver goes further:

"Many practitioners in project management observe these discussions with irritation. Practices are often promoted in a way that taking sides with one of them requires the fundamental rejection of another one. Project managers are sometimes unsettled by this and wonder what they are going to lose with such a step.

And they are right. The moment may come when this other behavior, method, or tool is more favorable in a specific situation. It is helpful, therefore, to have a basic concept – what it is that makes a practice favorable or detrimental to a given situation and how this practice should be implemented.

This is the concept that allows things to fall into place. This concept has a name: 'Situational Project Management' or, in short, *SitPM*"³

This book is an excellent treatise on all kinds of tough situations that project managers may have to face in the real world of project management. Worse yet, project managers with lesser experience and without a realistic study of the project's actual situation, may easily overlook the potential damage from situations like the many examples provided. The author's situational examples are culled from worldwide case reports that have not only been made publicly available, but are also extensively backed up by the author's personal contacts and interviews with managers and others directly involved.

So what you may ask? The "so what" is that this book is not about what *should* be done, but rather about what *could* be done. That is upon discovery of adverse situations surrounding a project that may have been overlooked as a risk, or otherwise deliberately set aside, ignored, or "not in the budget".

Consequently, this book provides learning and solutions that will *not* be found in any of the popular project management methodology expositions published today. Such treatise are based on some theoretical constructs and/or widely observed practices that appear to be generally successful, and then simplified as much as possible for purposes of instruction and certification. They do not provide solutions to the multitude of problems that project managers actually face in real practice every day.

So, if you want the *real dirt*⁴ on the realities of day-to-day project management, together with the dynamics of success and failure in an ever-new mixture of situational intelligence, luck and merit, then read this book. You will find fascinating descriptions, often in great detail, of past successes, and failures and how each came to be.

Indeed, in his Preface, the author concludes by stating: "In this book, I hope to provide project managers with as much guidance as possible to develop [an] adaptive [*SitPM*] approach to their projects."⁵

About the author

Oliver F. Lehmann, PMP, CLI-CA, holds a Master of Science Degree in Project Management from the University of Liverpool, UK. He had practiced project management for more than 12 years, mostly for the automotive industry and related trades, when he decided to make a change and become a trainer, speaker and author in 1995. He has had assignments in Asia, Europe and the USA for companies such as DB Schenker Logistics, Microsoft, Olympus, and Deutsche Telekom. He is also a Visiting Lecturer at the Technical University of Munich. Oliver served as President of the South Germany Chapter of the Project Management Institute, USA from 2013 to 2018.⁶

Book Structure

The contents of this book are set out in six chapters and four Appendices. Of these, *Chapter 3 – A Typology of Projects* is by far the largest, setting out as it does a broad range of actual projects used to reflect and distinguish between the chosen subheadings of the chapter. For this reason, we have included the subheadings of this chapter in the following chapter listing.

Chapter

1. The Situational View on Project Management
2. Digging Deeper
3. A typology of Projects
 - 1) Introductory Questions
 - 2) Best Practice Approaches vs. SitPM
 - 3) A Research Project: The First Objective, Develop a Typology
 - 4) Mark 1 Projects and Mark *n* Projects
 - 5) Greenfield Projects and Brownfield Projects
 - 6) Siloed Projects and Solid Projects
 - 7) Blurred Projects and Focused Projects
 - 8) High-Impact Projects and Low-Impact Projects
 - 9) Customer Projects and Internal Projects
 - 10) Stand-Alone Projects and Satellite Projects
 - 11) Predictable Projects, Exploratory Projects and Projects with Frequently Changing Requirements
 - 12) Composed Projects and Decomposed Projects

- 13) Further Types of Projects
 - i. Engineers' Projects and Gardeners' Projects
 - ii. Discretionary Projects and Mandatory Projects
 - iii. Single Handover Projects and Multiple Handover Projects
 - iv. No Deadline Projects, Single Deadline Projects and Multiple Handover Projects
 - v. One-Shot Projects vs. Multi-Shot Projects
4. Practices for SitPM
5. Some Basic Tools for SitPM
6. Leadership and the Dynamics of Success and Failure

Appendices

- A Answers to Introductory Questions
 - B Traps in Terminology
 - C What the Practitioners and Experts Say
 - D Twelve Suggestions for Situational Project Managers
- Glossary
References

The book has a total of 298 pages and the Appendices include a Glossary of Terms as shown in the listing.

What we liked – Part 1

This book is well written in a down-to-earth style that makes it relatively easy to understand and, for project management aficionados, it is certainly very entertaining and enjoyable. Where appropriate, the book is also well illustrated to provide a better understanding of the associated text.

As to sound advice, the essence of the text is that projects in real life do not respond necessarily to preconceived ideas, published standards, or even past experience. In short, don't take anything for granted. Instead, be ever vigilant of the surrounding, i.e., "situational" circumstances. Hence the book's repeated reference to "Situational Project Management", or "SitPM" as described earlier.

A particularly interesting feature is that a set of six Introductory Questions appears at the beginning of each of the first five chapters. These questions are similar in format to typical multiple choice exam questions providing options from which you, as the project manager, should choose the best of several courses of action. However, the questions, and the answers are far from black and white. Indeed, many of the options would take your project down a quite different path and set of consequences.

In fact, just like real life.

Yes, the book also provides the author's answers to his questions, but not in the expectation of being right or wrong, but rather on the basis of the circumstances described in the ensuing chapter. So, you are invited to revisit the set of questions after reading the rest of the chapter to see how the appropriate answers become clearer after digesting the circumstance described.⁷

As an example, consider question #4 at the beginning of Chapter 1 that states:⁸

"4. Projects are different from operations in which of the following aspects?

- a) Projects are limited by resources that may not be available in sufficient quantities at all times.
- b) Projects are performed to meet objectives or satisfy needs, or to create another kind of value.
- c) Projects should be performed following the cycle of Plan-Do-Check-Act.
- d) Projects are temporary endeavors and are unique by nature and definition."

Author's answer:⁹

"Q4(d). *Temporary* and *unique* are attributes that distinguish projects from operations, which are continuous and repetitive by definition. A note: Operations are of course also temporary – nothing lasts forever, at least in industry. The difference is that projects are intended to be finished when work has been done and objectives achieved. Operations are ended when their processes or deliverables are no longer up to date, when resources in use are worn out, when the environment no longer supports or accepts them, or when they are no longer a sustainable and profitable business."

Not everyone would agree with this cut and dried answer, especially in the "uniqueness" aspect. But then that depends on how you define "unique" – must it be absolute, or just comparative?

What we liked – Part 2

We also liked the way that Oliver Lehmann emphasizes the importance of practical experience and debunks the idea that "one size fits all". As he says:¹⁰

"Project management cannot simply be learned at school and then applied. Practical experience helps one to gain familiarity and awareness with the tools and techniques commonly used in project management and to understand their value. This personal contact with the discipline is important, but it can never be complete and will never suffice to understand and master all eventualities found in the complex environment in which project managers perform their jobs.

For example, some projects are run as internal projects, which means that they are cost centers for the performing organizations that run them for their own purposes. Other projects are performed for paying customers under contract and constitute profit centers for the performing organization, the contractor. ***The experiences that project managers collect in either of these two types of projects are significantly different.*** [Emphasis added.]

He goes on to say:¹¹

"Project managers often have no personal experience in both types of projects; their professional history is dealing solely with either customer projects or internal ones. Project managers running internal projects mostly consider themselves agents of change in organizational, technical, or other areas. Project managers in customer projects manage an existing business relationship (at least an important element of this relationship) and have to consider the often conflicting business interests of two parties: customer and contractor."

This is a serious distinction that is often overlooked in any discussion or presentation of project

management standards. Which brings up the topic of success and failure. As he says:¹²

"No doubt, some projects are 100% failures. Then there are projects that are mixtures of successes and failures, which probably constitute a majority of projects. If the perception of success is stronger than the judgment of failure, one may then call the project successful. ...

Success in this understanding is not the absence of failure, but the prevalence of successes over failures in the perception and judgment of a majority of relevant stakeholders. Projects without at least a grain of failure may not exist at all."

Downside

After just reading the book's title and the text quote at the beginning of this review, potential readers of all stripes may be forgiven for thinking that here we have a whole new approach to the subject of project management. In other words, they may think that SitPM is yet another Philosopher's Stone in the search for project success that should be evaluated against the many other offerings promoted in the market place.

If readers should think that, then we strongly demur.

The reality is, that this book is about project management in real life and for any and all projects of any significant size, complexity, duration, significance or any other dimension. That is to say nothing of different domains and/or different industry/product sectors. So don't be misled.

We did, however, find many paragraphs that are either unnecessarily long or even excessively long.¹³ More "white space" would have made the book easier to read as well as being more easily assimilated. Consequently, we would describe the book as only moderately easy reading.

In Chapter 4, Oliver opens with the observation:¹⁴

"In this chapter, several topics may seem to be repeated, especially the tension field between predictable and Agile projects. There is nevertheless a fundamental difference, because in this chapter, the question is not what the project is, but how you approach and manage it."

He goes on to say:¹⁵

"When you are assigned to a project, you have only a few options to select from: yes, no, and maybe a 'yes, but . . .' Often, there is not an option to say no."

We are inclined to disagree. In our view, a good project manager should stand up and say something like:¹⁶ "Thank you – I really like the look of this challenge. Please give me a couple of days to do some homework and I'll get back to you." This gives you a chance to come back and negotiate the resources you'll need to be successful.

You may think that this ploy is a one way to the exit door. But assuming the company is worth its salt and you are dealing with a seasoned manager, you will be respected for standing your ground and your evident determination to succeed.

Summary

Oliver Lehmann concludes his Preface with these words:¹⁷

"In this book, I hope to provide project managers with as much guidance as possible to develop this adaptive approach to their projects. To make the best of this book, I recommend doing some analysis from time to time on the project [using the following questions]:

1. To what type does the project belong?
2. What degree of dependence and independence will the project manager have?
3. What is the planning horizon that project:
 - (a) requires and
 - (b) allows for in the two dimensions of time and granularity?
4. To what leadership behaviors ('Achieving Styles') will the project respond most positively?
5. How much direction does the team need and value? How much self-organization can it conduct and will appreciate?
6. Based on which assumptions have project decisions been made so far, and what happens if they prove wrong?
7. How much non-productive time is left for the project manager to do organizational tasks?
8. How will the project implement its change request management process not only to allow it to engineer benefits and add value but also to protect the project from catastrophe?
9. What software should the project manager use?"

So there you have it. Good luck with your projects!

R. Max Wideman
Fellow, PMI

¹ Lehmann, Oliver F. *Situational Project Management – The Dynamics of Success and Failure*, Taylor & Francis Group, Florida, USA, © 2016, p26.

² Ibid, p xvii

³ Ibid, p xvii-xviii.

⁴ "Real dirt" – a rather slang expression implying chicanery and other forms of mismanagement.

⁵ Ibid, p xxii

⁶ Ibid, p xxiii

⁷ For the record, out of the total of 180 possible responses, we got less than half of them anywhere close and of the remainder, we had some difficulty with the author's suggestions. Well – let us just say a good topic for further discussion.

⁸ Ibid, p2

⁹ Ibid, p231

¹⁰ Ibid, p4-5

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid p21.

¹³ A good example of lack of white space is on p7. The paragraph on this page occupies 29 lines, consisting of 16 sentences, one of which contains 51 words. Compare this with the recommended structure described in [Issacon IAC #1453 "The Wideman 3-4-5 Principle" slide #7](#). On this basis there should be at least three separate paragraphs. Another similar example is to be found on page 12.

¹⁴ Ibid, p139

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Assuming it is a project of some significance . . .

¹⁷ Ibid, p xviii, which we find suitable for our review summary.