

# Governmentality

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The concept of corporate governance is by now well known. Briefly, it is the system of rules, practices, and processes by which a firm is directed and controlled. More generally, *governance* as a broad term is defined as “the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs” (Carlsson, Ramphal, Alatas, & Dahlgren, 1995, p.2). While corporate governance is the system of financial control through the board of directors, the term *governance* has also been used relationally. Relational governance aims at influencing networks to create innovation, reciprocity, trust, and self-organization for organizations that require collective action, such as megaprojects (Gil, 2016). Project governance that includes multiple firms and other agencies is more complex than the corporate governance of a single firm or organization. First, there is no necessary alignment between the many corporate governance doctrines that might be involved. Second, the project duration might require an overall code of governance separate from those of the firms involved. Third, there may well be stakeholders to govern that are not themselves directly involved as project partners in the governance of the project.

## Governmentality

To address the latter two cases, the concept of governmentality has proven useful. Governmentality was a term first introduced by the French historian of ideas, Michel Foucault, in his collection of lectures at the College de France on the *Birth of Biopolitics* in 1979 (Marks, 2000, p. 128). These lectures engaged with the changing face of liberalism as a political project. For Foucault, governmentality meant combined strategies of organizational governance in a broad sense, as well as self-governance by those made subjects of organizational governance.

Foucault (2007, p. 108) describes three processes as the core of governmentality. The first process involves creating taken-for-granted practices, drawing both from existing institutions and procedures as well as *de novo* reflections, calculations, and tactics. Foucault (1997) emphasizes that these practices are not invented by individuals but derive from the norms of cultures, societies, and social groups. The second process involves deploying knowledge via a power-knowledge nexus that includes the state and learned professions. The third process involves developing technologies of the self, positioning personal identities of those governed. These technologies revolve around the question: Who are we? (Foucault, 1982), and represent a broader epistemological shift in seeing actors as being “entrepreneurs of their selves” (Cooper, 2015). Together, these three processes help us understand the ways in which governmentality operates (Mitchell, 2006).

The term *governmentality* is a fusion of *government* and *mentality* and means, actively, governing through mentalities (Müller, Pemsel, & Shao, 2014). As du Gay (2000, p. 168) suggests, governmentality “create[s] a distance between the decisions of formal political institutions and other social actors, conceive[s] of these actors as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, and seek[s] to act upon them through shaping and utilising their freedom.” What is novel about liberal forms of governance is that the personal projects and

ambitions of individual actors become entangled and form alliances with those of organizational authorities and dominant organizations.

## **Governmentality Through Cultural Design**

It was while researching an alliance project to build some infrastructure for the Sydney 2000 Olympics that the usefulness of the notion of governmentality became evident (Clegg, Pitsis, Rura-Polley, & Marosszeky, 2002). The Alliance that was building the infrastructure consisted of four lead organizations and numerous subcontractors. Lacking any overall alignment in their norms of governance the Alliance decided to design their own project culture. Hence, in some respects, they differed from Foucault's stipulations of governmentality because they chose to design these commitments. They were, however, guided very much by social norms in the construction industry. What they sought to do was design a cultural set of commitments that were the antithesis of these norms. The norms they sought to oppose were those of adversarial conflict; self-interest on the part of contracting parties; litigiousness, and a lack of care for the safety and well-being of communities, ecologies and employees, among others. In addition, they sought to adhere to norms of timeliness and cost control.

The culture was intended to be a set of mutually binding commitments to which all parties in the project would subscribe. The nub of these commitments was a 10-point set of cultural commitments:

### **Alliance Cultural Commitments**

1. Build and maintain a champion team, with champion leadership, which is integrated across all disciplines and organizations

2. Commit corporately and individually to openness, integrity, trust, cooperation, mutual support and respect, flexibility, honesty and loyalty to the project
3. Honor our commitments to one another
4. Commit to a no-blame culture
5. Use breakthroughs and the free flow of ideas to achieve exceptional results in all project objectives
6. Outstanding results provide outstanding rewards
7. Deal with and resolve all issues from within the alliance
8. Act in a way that is “best for project”
9. Encourage challenging *BAU* (Business as Usual) behaviors
10. Spread the alliance culture to all stakeholders

The culture was designed by the Alliance members for the Alliance members to use as a point of reference as the project unfolded. That they did so on many occasions was confirmed by the ethnographic observations the research team made of the Alliance over a nearly two-year period. What was perhaps most significant about the governmentality that this set of commitments created was the way in which these values became lived experience for the Alliance. The lived experience extended right down to and including subcontractors and trade union members, all of whom were inducted in and committed to the principles. In part, the commitments were not only ideational but also material. To the extent that the project came in on time, under budget, and met its other key performance indicators (KPIs) of ecological sustainability, maintaining and building social capital, and securing employee occupational health and safety, then all parties to the Alliance would benefit through the distribution of a profit share—the amount saved over the budgeted cost. The KPIs recognized not only internal stakeholders of the project—such as the firms and organizations involved and the unionized employees on the project—but also the communities in which the project was

being conducted and the ecologies it traversed: the harbor, foreshore, and underneath dwellings where tunneling occurred. The budgeted savings came in part through the collaborative culture created and in part through the innovations it facilitated.

In particular, the practice of governmentality *aspired* to create a common sensemaking frame (Weick, 1995; Colville, Waterman, & Weick, 1999) whereby project participants would voluntarily and willingly agree to be governed in their conduct by these commitments. Their identity as Alliance members was positioned as primary, rather than their identity as members of the organizations forming the Alliance. Obedience was rationalized and justified in terms of a collective interest in budget savings (Jackson & Carter, 1998, p. 51). It was the prospect of these that rendered the commitments tangible—people in the project knew that if they succeeded in meeting these commitments, they would individually and organizationally benefit materially.

Especially important was that governmentality posed an alternative to policing, litigation, and arbitration through the design of collective and coherent sensemaking. Collaborative commitment and transparency were built into the moral fiber of the project. Each self-interested actor, both individually and organizationally, was constituted in such a way that they had something to gain from greater collaboration within the project. Individual and organizational bonuses were tied to performance on the KPIs defined in such a way as to ensure no trade-off between indicators: all had to exceed normalized benchmarks for bonuses to be activated. Indeed, performance became translated into performativity—an awareness of always being on view, on stage, and on show, in not only what one does but also in how one does it, through marking progress on KPIs through charts displayed on the project office walls.

Governmentality focuses on techniques embedded in specific rationalities that are oriented toward creating certain types of subject mentalities. Essentially, the objective is to generate *liberal subjects* whose compliance with governmentality is premised on their freedom to choose rather than their subordination. Such freedoms are socially constructed. In the case of the Alliance project, the social construction was made by the Alliance in deciding what they wanted to be: not a typical project. Alliance members believed themselves to have been free of extraneous power in determining their rules of engagement that they freely chose. Focusing on the analytics of governmentality helps us to understand how political processes work and how they include the cultural processes of self-formation and subjectivity (Barnett, Clarke, Cloke, & Malpass, 2014). Alliance members were managed through their freedoms rather than through imposing an external set of controls that forbade actions.

Governmentality is an alternative to reliance on governance with its emphasis on prescribed codes, often legally framed. Governmentality relied in large part on self-surveillance (Sewell, 1998; Fleming & Spicer, 2014) and subjectification, choosing an identity in which being an Alliance member rather than a delegates of their respective organizations was privileged. The aim of using a governmental approach in project management is for the personal ambitions of those governed to become enmeshed with those of the overall project management team.

The successful use of governmentality can have positive impacts on outcomes at both the project and organizational levels (Müller, Zhai, & Wang, 2017). Project-based organizations are temporary; thus, the key attribute of project organization governmentality is the rapid ability to develop a team of self-responsible and self-organizing people (Müller et al., 2014) blended from a larger number of organization members that constitute the project-based organization. In Clegg et al.'s (2002) investigations of governmentality within the project team, subtle devices were prominently displayed in the project headquarters. These devices included

banners bearing images of the desired outcome of the project, slogans proclaiming team members to be guided by *whatever is best for the project*, as well as stories of the project from media reports and notices of project-related social events. While Clegg et al. (2002) explored the practices of governmentality *internally* within the project team, where the incentives of actors are interconnected through contractual obligations, project teams can use strategies in practice to infuse governmentality *externally* to the project team, within the larger stakeholder community. One such practice of governmentality, adopted from the sphere of consumption, is branding (Nihan, Mahalingham & Clegg, 2019).

### **Governmentality Through Social Media Branding**

Forms of governmentality can be extended to less immediately involved stakeholders, in addition to those internal to a project. It is said that power can be most effective when it is least observable (Lukes, 2005), which governmentality—a key construct in the literature on covert power (Milani, 2009)—facilitates. Subtle and mundane branding strategies used in infrastructure megaprojects to manage *external* stakeholders also have an impact on internal stakeholders, especially the project team and in the way their normative universe is shaped as they deploy strategies to manage external stakeholders in the project community. A recent paper (Nihan, Mahalingham, & Clegg, 2018) on the use of branding in a major metro project in India provides an excellent discussion on the strategic use of social media to achieve governmentality of external stakeholder

The use of diverse forms of branding to influence consumers has some similarity to governmentality practices: both make the exercise of power seem rational and natural (Lemke, 2002), such as consumption of specific brands as a matter of brand loyalty becoming a part of everyday rationality, as Marcuse (1964) outlined in an early critical account. Branding extends a complex set of meanings, associations, and experience that create emotional, relational, and

strategic elements in the minds of those perceiving and enacting dispositions toward brands (Aaker, 1996). Branding increasingly penetrates everyday life, ranging from business communications to interpersonal relationships (Lect, 2012). Branding techniques include various forms of organizational self-presentation and promotion (Scott, 2010).

Organizations use social media to engage with audiences (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeck., 2013). Social media enhances the bond between the consumer and the organization by using user-generated content to achieve goals. In project organizations, these will likely be oriented toward specific audiences whose potential impact on the progress of the project can be significant. Branding in construction is much more targeted, which makes it an appropriate vehicle for governmentality. A recent paper (Nihan, Mahalingham, & Clegg, 2018) on the use of branding in a major metro project in India provides an excellent discussion on the strategic use of social media to achieve governmentality of external stakeholders.

In the project being researched—a major metro network in an Indian city—social media was used to create dominant, complementary, persuasive and legitimate discourses that sought to incorporate various communities into the sensemaking of the project team. Analyzing the social media communications of the metro rail organization showed that social media strategies were used to promote the organization and give progress updates, appealing to and targeting sections of the community. The effect of this governmentality on the community through the creation of a positive brand image for the project was to build support and create community advocates. Not only was the project community influenced but also the project team, in large part recruited from the broader community. Project team effects included enhanced job perceptions, an ability to attract talent, as well as the production of project team advocates. As a result of the governmentality effects on the project community, team members saw the megaproject as socially committed, safe, clean, prestigious and iconic for the city.



The megaproject studied emphasized, in particular, project progress updates, which comprised 61% of all tweets. Progress updates include locations of activity so that the public could connect with construction progress, enabling them to feel connected to the materiality of the project. The renovation of community buildings and parks was publicized in this way, creating a sense of external stakeholder commitment to the project.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) noted that social media is largely used by younger age groups, restricting the effects of governmentality; thus, while the use of project branding will reach some constituencies of interest, it will not reach all. A notable feature of Indian urban life is noisy and vociferous public protests, which were extremely limited in the case of the metro project. To some extent, this could be attributed to the judicious use of social media to keep communities governmentally well informed, so that they were prepared for and acquiesced in the project's manifestations.

## **Conclusion**

Governmentality is a concept with some useful applications in project management research and practice. Not only can effective governmental strategies secure an enhanced commitment on the part of project team members and minimize conflict between them, they can also be used to advance a broader set of KPIs than is customary and to minimize fractious relationships with communities whose stakeholders have interests in the project's accomplishment.

The use of social media is a double-edged weapon, however. Just as it is possible for project teams to use it to try and anticipate and reduce potential opposition to the deprivations that a project might make on stakeholder interests by publicizing its benefits, it can also be wielded as a weapon by opponents of these projects. A good example of this is the WestConnex Action Group in Sydney, Australia, that ran a sophisticated social media and web-based

campaign (<http://www.westconnexactiongroup.org.au/>) against a major road project. On the one hand, official but limited use of social media was opposed by a contradictory use of that media that drew on social norms of community protest to create a strong sense of social purpose opposed to the development. In many ways, in terms of popular reach and mobilization, the countervailing use by the WestConnex action group appeared to have been far more effective in terms of governmental mobilization than the WestConnex project's official use. The latter's use was largely print, banner and web-based and did not use social media as successfully as the opposition, despite the opposition being powerless to stop the development.

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