Building on “Soft Systems for Soft Projects”: Project management lessons learned

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Technology, Sydney
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Certificate of authorship / originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree, except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Kerry Costello
3 July 2012
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<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Action Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARC / SPIRT</td>
<td>Australian Research Council / Strategic Partnerships with Industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAPS</td>
<td>Coaching and Performance System – NSW Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPWS</td>
<td>NSW Department of Public Works and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLP</td>
<td>NSW Government Licensing Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>GLS</td>
<td>NSW Government Licensing System</td>
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<tr>
<td>HPRB</td>
<td>NSW Health Professionals Registration Boards</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IJPM</td>
<td>International Journal of Project Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM&amp;T</td>
<td>NSW Information Management &amp; Technology Blueprint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRNOP</td>
<td>The International Research Network on Organizing by Projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD</td>
<td>Information Systems Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS / IT</td>
<td>Information Systems / Information Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>LO / LO</td>
<td>Learning Organisation / Organisational Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>MbP</td>
<td>Managing by Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>United Kingdom National Health Service</td>
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<td>NMB</td>
<td>NSW Nurses and Midwives Board</td>
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<td>NPM</td>
<td>New Public Management</td>
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<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td>OICT</td>
<td>NSW Office of Information and Communications Technology (2003/04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>OGC</td>
<td>United Kingdom Office of Government Commerce</td>
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<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARA</td>
<td>Practitioner and Researcher (Soft Systems for Soft Projects) Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIR</td>
<td>Project Implementation Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMBOK®</td>
<td>The Project Management Body of Knowledge®, PMI</td>
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<td>PMI</td>
<td>Project Management Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMIS</td>
<td>Project Management Information System</td>
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<td>PO / PMO</td>
<td>Project Office / Project Management Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>POM</td>
<td>Processes for Organization Meanings (‘POM’) model (Checkland and Holwell, 1998b p106)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRINCE2™</td>
<td>Projects in Controlled Environments (Trade Mark of OGC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PVM</td>
<td>Public Value Management</td>
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<td>QSARP</td>
<td>Qualitative and Strategic Audit of the [NSW Police Service] Reform Process</td>
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<tr>
<td>RFS</td>
<td>NSW Rural Fire Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSM</td>
<td>Soft Systems Methodology</td>
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<td>SSPMA</td>
<td>Soft Systems Project Management Approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>UTS</td>
<td>University of Technology, Sydney</td>
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This thesis explores lessons emerging from a multi-disciplinary affiliation of practitioner-researchers endeavouring to apply soft systems thinking to project management practice between 1998 and 2006 in New South Wales (NSW) public sector agencies.

The research began with award of an Australian Research Council grant to the Project Management Research Program at the University of Technology, Sydney and the NSW Police Service. Titled “Soft Systems for Soft Projects”, the award application had been made with reference to the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) developed by Professor Peter Checkland and colleagues. Hard project management approaches were proving inadequate for dealing with the complex and shifting project environments being encountered in NSW public sector agencies. “Soft Systems for Soft Projects” was a multi-faceted and multi-level inquiry that delivered practical results. Affiliation members carried learning from this experience into other public sector change management initiatives and wider project management research and practice networks.

The inquiry reported in this thesis was initially mapped out while the author was managing a NSW public sector agency’s response to an across-government e-commerce initiative. The aim of the inquiry was to look back on the affiliation’s attempts to reconcile hard and soft perspectives, as represented by project management and SSM respectively, while supporting development of an organisational project management capability through implementing a Project Management Information System (PMIS). It was framed within a modified model of the process of inquiry which Mode 2 use of SSM facilitates (Checkland and Holwell, 1998b, p. 170) and particularly focused on the affiliation’s engagements with Checkland and Holwell’s (1998, p. 106) “processes for organization meanings” (POM) model.

The research material is drawn from the affiliation’s published outputs, the author’s personal documentation of emerging project management practice, public sector practice guides and documents about the contextual discourses that were shaping the scope of project management action at the agency level. These are “read” according to a model developed for exploring the relationship between the documents according to level of public exposure and close versus long range interest. In a novel approach, the POM model is used as a sense-making framework for appreciating the dynamic relationships between the agency projects / programs, internal organisational processes and the external shaping discourses as documented in this material.