

**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
2012

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis rests upon the foundation provided by the “Soft Systems for Soft Projects” Chief, Partner Chief and Associate Investigators who, in 1998, embarked on a “development project undertaken to acquire new knowledge and involving risk or innovation”. At that time, Ms Lynn Crawford and Adjunct Professor Alan Stretton of the Project Management Program at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and Assistant Commissioner Christine Nixon and Mr David Bradley of the NSW Police Service championed the project.

Building upon this foundation would not have been possible without Lesley Bentley and Julien Pollack as co-practitioners and co-research students. Lesley is a colleague of enthusiasm and integrity who has lighted my path along the way. Julien is a colleague of talent and energy and a co-puzzler over some really big questions. I am grateful for the exceptional opportunity provided by Dr Lynn Crawford for us to become co-authors and co-presenters of our developing practice and research. Also, I appreciate the assistance given by Anna, Antony, David, Dior, Eleanor, Jeanette, Rachel and Zoe and I acknowledge the contribution of Robert Howard who was bravely prepared to try the POM model. Dr Janet Hutchinson has contributed her copyediting / proofreading expertise to Chapters 1 to 8 according to UTS thesis editing policy / guidelines. On a personal level, I wish to express my appreciation to my colleague and mentor Jim Tzannes, Director of the former NSW Health Professionals Registration Boards.

I have been very fortunate in my supervisors, initially Dr Lynn Crawford and then Dr Kaye Remington as a co-supervisor. Both are outstanding academics and professionals who were prepared to indulge a student who was out there researching at the boundaries of possibility. More recently, I have been equally fortunate in having Associate Professor Shankar Sankaran as my supervisor at UTS. His calm patience in the face of “circumstances beyond the student’s control”, unflagging support and sage management has guided me in bringing my thesis to completion. In achieving this I have particularly benefited from the felicitous appointment of Dr Julien Pollack as my co-supervisor and the wise counsel provided by my examiners. Any errors and eccentricities in interpretation are, however, my sole responsibility.

For Makare, Mayet and Dulcie Worrall and in acknowledgement of fellow travellers met along the way, particularly Murray Lawler, Dr Jann Karp and Brett Rawlings.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AL	Action Learning
AR	Action Research
ARC / SPIRT	Australian Research Council / Strategic Partnerships with Industry
CAPS	Coaching and Performance System – NSW Health
DPWS	NSW Department of Public Works and Services
GLP	NSW Government Licensing Project
GLS	NSW Government Licensing System
HPRB	NSW Health Professionals Registration Boards
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IJPM	International Journal of Project Management
IM&T	NSW Information Management & Technology Blueprint
IRNOP	The International Research Network on Organizing by Projects
ISD	Information Systems Development
IS / IT	Information Systems / Information Technology
LO / LO	Learning Organisation / Organisational Learning
MbP	Managing by Projects
NHS	United Kingdom National Health Service
NMB	NSW Nurses and Midwives Board
NPM	New Public Management
NSW	New South Wales
OICT	NSW Office of Information and Communications Technology (2003/04)
OIT	NSW Office of Information Technology (1999-2003)
OGC	United Kingdom Office of Government Commerce
PA	Public Administration
PARA	Practitioner and Researcher (Soft Systems for Soft Projects) Affiliation
PIR	Project Implementation Review
PM	Project Management
PMBOK®	The Project Management Body of Knowledge®, PMI
PMI	Project Management Institute
PMIS	Project Management Information System
PO / PMO	Project Office / Project Management Office
POM	Processes for Organization Meanings ('POM') model (Checkland and Holwell, 1998b p106)
PRINCE2™	Projects in Controlled Environments (Trade Mark of OGC)
PVM	Public Value Management
QSARP	Qualitative and Strategic Audit of the [NSW Police Service] Reform Process
RFS	NSW Rural Fire Service
SSM	Soft Systems Methodology
SSPMA	Soft Systems Project Management Approach
UTS	University of Technology, Sydney

ABSTRACT

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.