On the Origin of Issues

Why projects (and other collaborations) fail ...

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Colophon

Foreword

On the Origin of Issues is about the, inherently not so funny topic of why projects (and other collaborations) fail ....

A bit over 15 years before publishing this book I got intrigued by how come some perfectly feasible, viable and doable projects, failed. At some point thinking about this, I realised that I had the same feeling with these projects, as I had with parents of terribly misbehaving screaming kids. And like with these parents, I wanted to walk to the responsible executive and senior stakeholders, firmly shake them up, and tell them to do something about the misbehaviours, causing too little results and too many frustrated people. But then I started to get intrigued about how come these smart and dedicated stakeholders didn't do what they were supposed to? Did they even know what was going on? Did they know what to do about it? Or were they afraid to step in?

And these questions triggered me to write a book for stakeholders in and near projects. To help them better recognise and understand the patterns that cause projects (and other collaborations) to fail, enabling them to step in.

But then capturing and ordering all these patterns, turned out to be quite a challenge. Since I started writing the book some 15 years ago, I paused writing the book several times, throwing everything away, and start over again,. Until the patterns and clustering them into areas and topics got more shape.

The result is an anthology of about 180 patterns with backgrounds, anecdotes and advice, that can help the reader to better understand what is happening in projects, and what needs attention to shape more fruitful, and less frustrating project for everyone involved. Anthology are not easy to read and you may consider reading it in parts and consulting it as a reference.

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Introduction

Projects and programmes fail, because they are allowed to.

Except for some rare cases of bad luck with technical problems, most projects fail because of avoidable reasons. Lack of leadership, lack of commitment, lack of teamwork, lack of communication, and many other patterns in the playing field, that we euphemistically refer to as *politics*.

On the Origin of Issues, provides insights and guidance to executive and senior stakeholders to help them better understand the patterns that cause their projects to fail. Recognising and understanding these patterns is half the solution and will enable them to address these patterns timely.
For junior project managers the book is a comprehensive anthology of patterns, they will encounter in their career, which most senior project managers had to find out the hard way.

There are many books in the market on project management. And especially the books on practices, promise that the way of working they describe, will improve chances of success or even guarantee it. In the past half century however, none of these practices lived up to that promise. And none of them became a *de facto* standard. Perhaps the key to success was never in being able to *repeat the same steps the same way in every project*, but more the result of the capability to resolve problems.

If we look at something as simple as learning to ride a bicycle, we can observe that teaching children to ride a bicycle, is not about gears, cadence, speed, training procedures, bicycle maintenance procedures, reporting training outcomes and cycling key performance indicators.
Learning to ride a bicycle is about side wheels, wearing a helmet, band aids, wiping tears, giving a push (whether they like it or not), trying to walk next to the bike as long as you can (or are allowed to), and telling a child to get back on the bike after falling.

Similarly, managing projects to success, is not about all kinds of procedures, but primarily about understanding, preventing and resolving problems in order to clear the path to success.

Anthology of patterns

On the Origin of Issues provides an anthology of about 180 patterns. To make the anthology more accessible and readable the patterns are grouped into four sections: *The challenge*, *the playing field*, *the governance* and *the environment*.

Each of these sections has a brief introduction with a model for reference that is used for further break down of the patterns into chapters in which the the (loosely) related patterns are described. Straightforward patterns we all know are also included for completeness, but kept short.

The "Table of Patterns" on page vi provides a structured overview.

Sections

On the Origin of Issues is organised in the following sections:

Preamble		Introduction on what constitutes a project, some classics on failure, and the concept of *patterns*.
Patterns	The challenge	Patterns related to the challenge.
	The playing field	Patterns that occur in the playing field
	The governance	Patterns in the governance of projects and programmes.
	The environment	Patterns coming from the environment of the organisations involved.
Epilogue		Summary and conclusions.
Appendices		References and capita selecta.

What is a Project?

According to some best practices

Prince 2   According to Prince 2, *"A project is a temporary organization that is created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to an agreed Business Case"*. In addition to this definition Prince 2 further mentions the characteristics *change*, *cross functional*, *temporary*, *unique* and *uncertainty*, as well as making some implicit assumptions on the organisational degree of the environment, and the commitment of all team members.

PMBOK   PMBOK defines a project a slightly different as:
"*It's a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result*".

PMI   According to PMI:
A project is temporary in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources. And a project is unique in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal.

The definitions are suitable for the respective practices, but do also include assumptions that do not always hold.

Unique result   Many companies have similar projects that pursue similar results. They for example implement the same software, repeat connecting customers with their systems, or repeat becoming compliant with the same legislation. The only thing that is different between the projects, is the playing field, not the result, and often not even the approach.

Tangible business case   Business cases are not always very tangible, nor even elaborated or emanated from the original idea. For example projects like product and business development, are commonly driven by a commercial proposition for which the market will ultimately determine whether that was a valid business case. Compliance projects are predominantly driven by the consequences of not complying.

Organisation   Projects seldom start with an established fully operational project organisation in place. At best projects start with desired organisation charts, and initial role descriptions. Effectively shaping and materialising the organisation with mandated staff who have accepted their roles usually takes place during and as part of the project.

Defined
scope or
products   It would be perfect to have everything fully defined at the start. But in practice, business needs, goals, scope, and products are more often than not, not fully defined at the start of a project. And they need to be further elaborated during the project.

Common denominators

However ... there are common denominators, that apply to every project. Every project has:
- Governance with management
- that has a challenge,
- which requires the involvement of other people,
- all taking place in an environment.

Governance   Each project has one or more managers who need to pursue and govern a challenge, and for which they will have or require budget and resources.

Challenge   There is a challenge such as exploiting opportunities, resolving problems, or complying with internal/external requirements.

Playing field   All the people in and near a project, that play a role or have a stake in the project, either direct or behind the screens.

Environment   The people in the playing field work in a professional, organisational and cultural context, that influences their way of working and how they collaborate.

In this book there is a section for each common denominator, describing the patterns that can occur in that area.

Project, Programme, Transformation

For ease of reading the term *project* is used throughout this book for any type of similar collaboration, such as programmes, business change, business transformations, digital transformation, restructuring, and sourcing.

Programmes and transformations theoretically have a longer horizon and often consist of series of projects and/or changes that have smaller horizons. But in practice big projects are called programmes, and smaller development projects are called programmes too.

Executive and senior stakeholders

Project boards are part of a governance ecosystem in which project boards have to report, clarify and align. For example
- The management board on investment, proposition and progress.
- One or more portfolio boards on business cases and resource demand.
- A budget or investment board on investment and utilization.
- An architecture board on solution direction and technical choices.
- Other stakeholders in the playing field who have a say or vote, but have no seat in the steering board.

So rather than talking about the project board or board as the governing body of a project, the term *executive and senior stakeholders* is used instead. The executive and senior stakeholders are all the decision taking and voting stakeholders in and near the project.

Classics on failure

Cobb's Paradox

As the story goes, Martin Cobb, a CIO for the Canadian Treasury Board of the Canada Secretariat, posed in 1995 an intriguing question, that later became known as *Cobb's paradox*:
> *We know why projects fail.*
> *We know how to prevent failure.*
> *So why do projects fail?*

As with any paradox, there is a (hidden) premise that is incorrect .

Suppose Martin Cobb would have asked guests in a fast food restaurant:
> *We know what causes overweight.*
> *We know how we can prevent gaining weight.*
> *So why do we still have people with overweight?*

Would you then expect that people would say, "Hey, you are right!", throw their food in the bin, and run off to the next grocery store to buy some vegetables. Of course not. People will have a laugh about it, and continue eating. Furthermore, there is no need to ask such a question in a fast food restaurant as we know the possible answers:

*   People don't see it as a problem, because they don't care.
*   People don't see it as a problem now, because they think they have plenty of time to resolve it later.
*   People don't see it as a problem, because they don't believe the warnings.
*   People are aware that it is not good, but can't resist it.
*   It is habitual.

We could shape similar paradoxes on homework for school, speeding, drinking and they would all boil down to the same. No commitment.

Do we know what desired and undesired behaviours are? And do we know which undesired behaviours can cause projects to fail? Do we know how to respond to these behaviours and address the undesired ones? Are managers even trained on this topic? Not really.

Errare humanum est

A few thousand years ago, Seneca wrote:
Errare humanum est, (sed) perseverare diabolicum.
To make mistakes is human, (but) to persist is diabolical.

Since then, not much seems to have changed. There are plenty of people around today, who are very persistent in ignoring lessons learned from previous mistakes.
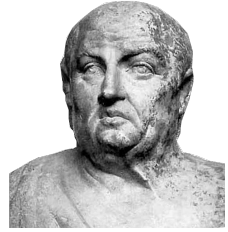
Murphy's law

A famous paradigm on failure is Murphy's law:
> *Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong.*

The intention of Murphy was to make people aware that, with big numbers, it is more likely that lesser probable events will indeed occur. In other words: the probability does not change, but if you repeat things often enough, you will eventually see also the more exceptional things actually occurring.

Over the years the explanation of Murphy's law shifted slightly to the superstition that, if things can go wrong, they actually will go wrong. That sounds as an ominous statistical anomaly, and is, in fact, a statistical misinterpretation.

Nevertheless Murphy's law is a very helpful way of thinking, as it helps people to think about rare and worst case scenarios, they would otherwise discard, which is very useful when assessing for example security and safety protocols.

In projects, Murphy's law can be used to trigger thinking about what appears to be the lesser probable scenarios. And sometimes elaborating some more exceptional scenarios reveals, that they are more probable than expected, and need to be taken into consideration.

CHAOS Reports

The CHAOS project benchmarks (1994-2009) by the Standish Group are popular research on project success and failure, and what causes projects to fail. Although the reports are not free of criticism, the outcomes provide some useful insights.

In the CHAOS reports roughly a third of the projects were a success, a third failed, and the remaining third challenged.

The factors, why projects get into trouble, are according to the CHAOS reports the lack of (summarised in order, most important first):
- Executive Support.
- User Involvement.
- Experienced Project Manager.
- Clear Requirements, Scope and Objectives.
- Standard (Software) Infrastructure.
- Formal Methodology.

These factors are not seldom found in lessons learned-reports of projects as well. Except for the infrastructure, all these factors are about people and how they collaborate.