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Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS)

December 2002

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Abstract

Appreciating stakeholders' reactions to a project is problematic, and ongoing, requiring some form of aid to thinking to assist project managers. This paper suggests a solution based on the perspective thinking literature of Churchman, Checkland, Linstone and Haynes. It is a practical solution which is adaptable to different problem domains and can make use of numerous inquiry methods. In this paper systems thinking, evolution, TOP, and Boulding's Faces of Power have been used. Rather than providing a detailed list of issues that will need to considered when critiquing stakeholders, the paper will suggest a perspectival thinking critiquing method designed to provide a useful heuristic for thinking about such complex problems.

Keywords: Stakeholder critique, perspectival thinking

Introduction

This paper is about how to go about critiquing stakeholders as part of managing sustainable information system projects. The authors' feel that perspectival thinking (Haynes, 2000) is a useful thinking heuristic for the identification of stakeholders' powers and options. By perspectival thinking is meant using different inquiry frames to cause participants to ask a differing series of questions generated as the result of using the various perspectives. The perspectives used by way of examples include, systems thinking, Boulding's faces of power (1978), Dennett's (1996) evolutionary epistemology, and Linstone's TOP (1984, 1993). This paper will conclude that using these, and other, epistemological perspectives will assist in providing a useful way of thinking about stakeholders and so assist IS project sustainability. The perspectives will be explained and applied to stakeholders but it will be assumed that appreciating stakeholder reactions is an important part of the management of large projects when there are numerous powerful stakeholders involved who can influence the operation of a project at different stages of its life.

Argyris and Schon's (1996) 'actionable knowledge' or 'theory in action' advises that useful decision heuristics (thinking aids) need to be pitched at the right 'rule of thumb' level. If too abstract, like von Bertanlaffy's General Systems Theory, then practioners will not be able to apply it. If too specific, then it may not be applicable across all new projects. The perspectival thinking approach (Haynes, 2000), driven from Churchman's design of human inquiry (1971), Checklands (1981) soft systems methodology and Linstone's TOP (1984, 1993) perspectives have been developed to be pragmatic. However, while the authors of these methodologies claim they have improved the quality of IS project management, it was thought useful to provide an alternative problem domain and a slight extension of the concept. The problem domain is stakeholder critique and the concept extension is to provide a wider range of linguistically generated perspectives aimed at assisting thinking about stakeholders.

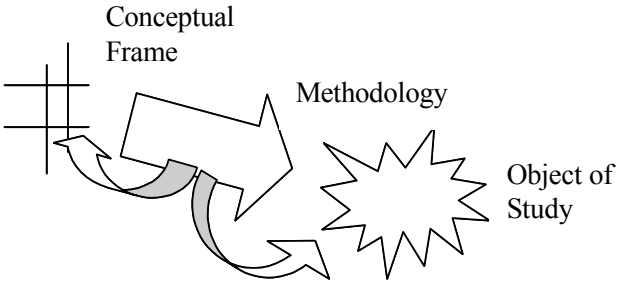
Multiple Perspectives

Haynes (2000) provides the theory of knowledge roots of the appreciation of perspectival thinking that argues there is some advantage in separating the object under study (stakeholders) from the perspective being used to inquire about that object. Human inquiry that aims to make the inquiry perspectives explicit departs from traditional scientific thinking in that it aims to use these perspectives to generate inquiry questions (see also Hintikka and Hintikka, 1982)). By making explicit a range of different perspectives it is intended to expand participants appreciation of the problem, in this case stakeholders. Perspectival inquiry aims

to encourage identifying, justifying and maybe changing inquiries perspectives. First, the unconscious perspectives of stakeholders, including those undertaking the stakeholder critique, need to be appreciated. Rather than only asking stakeholders for their perspectives, a range of different perspectives might be generated that might reveal unconscious perspectives but also provide a broader appreciation of the problem. It also acts to encourage an explicit search for conceptually new inquiry perspectives.

Thinking about the perspective being used on a project is akin to thinking about thinking. Thinking, as an adjective or course of action is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as 'to meditate on a problem;' it is a precursor to inquiry actions and hopefully eventual problem solving. While it is assumed that all vertebrate animals can think, process and store information, maybe only humans are 'self conscious' enough to be able to think about their own thinking (Walker, 1983). How far we can get with this introspection is unclear, for example, Blumenau (2001) argues (from Kant) that the structure of the brain may force us the think in certain ways, such as in terms of cause and effect. It is unclear if we can fully appreciate this when we think, or do anything about it.

Checkland (1981) suggested that thinking could be shown diagrammatically as:



If the 'frame' is replaced with 'perspective' then it provides a useful diagram for explaining perspectival thinking. Metcalfe (2002a) has adopted this to incorporate the role of argument in human inquiry and Churchman's (1971) point that our values (or ethics) may provide one of our primary perspectives on problems. Metcalfe (2002b) has also revised the tern 'values' to 'concerns' partly because it is easier to ask stakeholders their concerns that their values and so as to explain these perceptions in terms of human survival needs.

Hospers (1982) provides an exercise designed to demonstrate the presence of unconscious perspectives. If the exercise is undertaken in a group then it can help reveal that people have very different unconscious values/concerns thus automatically bringing very different unconscious perspectives on a problem. Hospers exercise tells a very simple (250 word) moral story about a social interaction between six people that results in the death of one. The audience is asked to discuss who is morally to blame for the death. Even with so little information participants have little problem selecting someone. Once the participant's primary value perspective has been revealed it is interesting to explore how frequently it is used to deal with other problem solving. For example, one participant who blamed the dead person for making the wrong decision, was concurrently working on some research to show how a South American country could get out of its present difficulties if it had a good decision making process.

It is being assumed that perspectives on a problem domain are semi permanent lens or filters resting in our heads. That we do not approach every new problem with an 'empty' head, free of memories is supported in the argument (Crosswhite, 1996) child psychology (Piaget, 1973) and evolution literature (Dennett, 1996). For example, Crosswhite (1996) suggests that, pre language children conceive of claims and test them prior to any attempt at a full and careful evaluation of any evidence. However, while acknowledging the need to appreciate unconscious perspectives held by stakeholders this paper is concerned with purposefully providing other perspectives both to reveal stakeholders unconscious perspectives, and also to help broaden the thinking of participants.

The Systems Thinking Perspective

Those interested in undertaking a study of stakeholders may make a conscious effort to draw on the systems thinking perspective (Churchman, 1971; Ulrich, 1983). This focuses participants on process (temporal transformation), wholeness/boundaries, inter-connectivity, multiple perspectives, and purpose. The process perspective encourages questions about inputs, outputs and transformation of stakeholders over time. What will be the stakeholder critique system (process), what transformation is sought? It may be to get the unsupportive stakeholders not to act against the project and the stakeholders who need to act, to do so. The

boundaries perspective brings to the fore questions of who is to be included (or excluded) in the stakeholder critique and why. This is both as a whole and as for sub groupings. The term stakeholder needs some definition. Possible definitions include, anyone without whose input a particular project would be unable to function. Alternatively, it might be defined more broadly as someone who has no formal role in a particular project but still be affected (positively or negatively) by its functioning.

The inter-connectivity perspective brings up questions such as how well networked the stakeholders are both between and within groups. Therefore, questions of how stakeholder groups will interact can be raised. Ulrich (1983) extensively discusses system purpose. This can prompt questions about the purpose of undertaking the stakeholder critique, and what purpose the stakeholders will give to the stakeholder critique exercise.

While it is not possible to be exhaustive about the questions that may arise using the systems thinking, it is hoped that some demonstration was made of how the system thinking perspectives can assist thinking.

Boulding/Linstone's T.O.P.

Another way of seeing problems is to use Boulding (1981) or Linstone's (1984, 1993) T. O. and P. perspectives; that is the Things, Organisations and Peoples. There would appear to be two levels at which these perspectives can be understood. The surface one is intended to generate technical questions such as names, numbers, resources and physical arrangements. The organisational perspective is intended to generate questions about inter-departmental politics, clashes with other groups and issues of whether stakeholder groups are representative (or if they should be). The personal perspective is intended to generate questions about the feelings of individual stakeholders, how the critique will align with their personal values, motivations and self esteem.

However, the way Mitroff and Linestone (1993) introduce the TOP suggests that there is an intention to also distinguish between a 'subjective' and an 'objective' episteme. For example, the more objective stakeholders might feel that it is appropriate to be aiming to prove the effectiveness of the new project. Others may feel that stakeholder critique is about seeking justification for the very different and yet perfectly reasonable perspectives of different stakeholders in order to be able to design a better system. Another way of using this subjective/objective split is in revealing stakeholders perspectives on the other stakeholders. Are they treating other stakeholders as 'things' to be educated and manipulated or as fellow intelligent people, collaboration with who will result in everybody learning? Is there any indication that the project needs the stakeholders' opinions and experiences in order to survive (the subjective view), or rather have their roles and essential criteria be identified prior to the stakeholder critique (the objective view)?

Critical Social Theory (CST)

Critical social theory (eg Alvesson and Skoldberg, (2000) is usually assumed to have emerged from the Frankfurt School which includes Adorno, Habermas and Marx. Its original purpose seems to be to provide a critical look at society with the dream of emancipation. This CST perspective may be useful to stakeholder critique in exposing explicit and implicit power structures. In IS this has been typified by redrafting the Knowledge is Power cliché into pointing out that rather 'Power defines Knowledge". However, Turner (2000) argues that the focus on 'empowerment' needs to be widened to view problems as resulting from individual human needs. He believes that critical social thinking should be using the perspective of humans as sensory individuals who are striving for food, relationships, power and their place in a community often at the expense of others. These inequalities are hidden by 'institutionalising' them as well as through language. This enables a ruling elite to call on the whole community to encourage projects that appear to be for the benefit of the institution, not just the elite, who have the most to gain. For example, a call to make a project more 'efficient' can be sold as a 'universal good.' However, the benefits of the efficiency may unequally go to the owners of capital at the expenses of workers and at the expense of those who want less consumption of natural resources. Efficiency can be perceived as a disguised call for one group of people to be given more resources than another. Stakeholder critique might gain from a CST perspective by asking questions about which group gains the most from the project, by revealing implicit power assumptions in the language to justify projects and trying to reveal who gets the benefits and who carries the social costs.

Evolution

The evolutionary view (Dennett, 1996; Dawkins 1989, Boulding, 1981) encourages a perspective of both the new project and the stakeholders as a species. The 'ideas as memes' perspective suggests that you think of a new idea as a new species being

introduced into the new environment of the minds of stakeholders. As with foxes being introduced into Australia, if the environment is amenable the new species will do well. The environment includes what other species (ideas) are present in the stakeholders mind, and how they all will adapt to the introduced species. This perspective suggests strategies like finding a stakeholder who will be able to nurture the new idea and then present it to the minds of others in an acceptable way.

Thinking of the stakeholders, rather than the idea, as different competing species encourages questions about how they compete, for what, how adaptable they are, what powers they have and how they are likely to perceive a new idea given their environment. Boulding (1981) emphasises the importance of remembering that species, stakeholders, are not competing with each other but rather for resources to achieve their goals, so how they see a new idea in term of their access to those resources is important.

Personal Powers Perspective

Boulding (1978) also provides a three-way classification of personal power which provides another way to perceive stakeholders. His three types of personal power are, destructive, integrative and economic. Everybody has these powers to varying degrees. They are possible actions that stakeholders can use to get their own way, and each can be used in a positive and negative way. Destructive power is the power to stop, damage or fail to support the new project. It will be seen as a positive power if it stops projects believed to be bad, and a negative one if it stop projects perceived as good. Economic power involves the power to get what you want by engaging or not in trade and exchange. Integrative power is slightly more complicated, but Boulding is referring to the sort of social power held by friends and religious leaders. It is a power that draws on the herd instinct in humans or what Schutz (1966) calls our inclusion needs. People who represent group membership can threaten your exclusion from a group, or offer greater inclusion as a means of getting their own way. So, stakeholders may be persuaded using integrative power, or they can resist a new project by developing a coherent loyal group of dissenters. Alternatively, the stakeholders can deny a voice to other stakeholders by treating them as outside of the respectable group. However, the three types of power are used in practice, the perspective of personal power of stakeholders does appear to be a useful for stakeholder critique.

Conclusion

This paper has tried very briefly to apply perspectival thinking to stakeholder critique, or at least demonstrate the approach. After a claim that project sustainability requires sustained stakeholder critique, a quick overview of the perspectival thinking approach was presented. This was followed by a sample of 5 possible perspectives merely to give the reader a taste of how this approach might work in practice. It may be unwise to think of these five perspectives as being in competition with each other or their having particular strengths or weaknesses in the same way metaphors would not be said to have strengths or weaknesses. Rather the perspectives are merely intended to be illustrative of how perspectival thinking might be undertaken in project management. The reader is encouraged to think of some more perspectives that might be useful to their particular complex social problem. Examples include Sowell's mention of underlying dialectic forces, Perelman's inquiry as argument and Morgan's metaphors of organisations. The intention was to provide a thinking heuristic that aligns with Argyris and Schon's call for 'actionable knowledge' or rule of thumb heuristics that can be used on a wide range of problems.

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