White Paper 2025-04

How to Foster Meaningful Conversations and Positive Tension for Project Success

Complex industrial projects are a human adventure. Complex projects are hard because they are delivered in shifting environments. Taking effective decisions requires meaningful and purposeful conversations looking at the situation from different viewpoints. To foster those discussions and enrich them, it is important to nurture contradictory and complementary, benevolent perspectives. In this White Paper we describe a number of feedback loops that are useful and needed to improve those meaningful conversations.

To apprehend a complex situation, look at it from multiple viewpoints and scales

Complex systems and situations require consideration of their multiple dimensions. For that, they need to be observed from different perspectives (like a 3D shape needs to be looked at from various viewpoints and not just through a 2D picture), and different scales from the nitty-gritty daily operational aspect to the strategic level. It will never fully provide the whole picture but will complement the initial view.

> **Fostering systematically independent feedback to generate different viewpoints on various areas of a complex project is essential to its success**

This translates for project organisations in making sure that there are various independent, diverse viewpoints on various aspects of complex projects.

From our experience, the inability of the project director or project governance to consider feedback that is not aligned with their current view of the project and foster meaningful conversations is an important indicator that a complex project is at risk.

Organising the emergence of independent and diverse viewpoints

A number of independent, diverse loops need to be consciously implemented in complex projects at various levels to achieve this proper multi-dimensional observation. The results must be exploited at the right level. Those initiatives are either embedded in the regular reporting, or are triggered periodically or on-demand. In fact, many such loops are actually implemented through usual good practices that have developed from experience.

At project governance level

In complement to the periodic (monthly to quarterly) reporting to the project sponsor / steering committee that provides a systemic overview of project performance, independent reviews can be triggered on demand or for major milestones: general project health check/ project assurance, peer reviews, targeted deep-dive expert reviews. A corporate project assurance role can provide this service (refer to our White Paper 2025-03 'How to Setup a Project Assurance Function within a Wider Project-Driven Organisation'). In certain circumstances, check lists per key milestones that are self-checked by project managers and possibly independently audited are another useful tool.

At project management level

The periodic monthly project performance report combines all relevant disciplines and the assessment of the consistency between inputs provides a measure of multi-dimensional checks, that can detect inconsistencies and create meaningful conversations. Of course, this requires that the report covers in a comprehensive manner all aspects of project management.

The project control manager in his strategist role is also available to conduct assessments of project progress and forecasts independently of the package manager delivery line.

On large projects, the matrix organisation between package delivery and discipline delivery (engineering, procurement, construction etc) also provides a combined viewpoint on the condition of the project.

At project control level

On the cost side, there is an independent check embedded between cost control and accounting whereby the cost control figures are checked independently by the reality of invoicing and cash.

Contract management is a discipline that takes a different viewpoint from the technical delivery of the project and can also provide an interesting diversified perspective.

At more specific discipline level

In most project-driven organisations, a matrix is setup between functional departments external to the project and disciplines embedded in the project. Functional departments are in particular in charge of checking the quality of the work and whether it follows expected processes. Functional heads external to the project can provide an interesting independent viewpoint on parts of the project.

Between project office and supplier / construction site

In our experience, it is always very insightful to spend some time on the ground on supplier premises or fabrication and construction sites and discuss with the

people actually doing the work. The feedback one gets from those visits is sometimes disturbing, contradictory with the vision from the project office, and always useful once filtered through experience.

Generating meaningful conversations from diverse viewpoints

All those viewpoints must provide objective pictures of the project, and also be benevolent and combined with

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the context of the observations. There must be a willingness to provide feedback; and conversely, a willingness by management to consider feedback as a basis for meaningful discussions leading to decisions. Refer to our [White Paper 2013-12 'Actual Project Leadership is About Organizing Effective Conversations – not to Run Properly Complicated Tools'](#)

Indirect benefits from fostering different viewpoints

In organisational complex systems, observation by itself does create change. Hence, by enforcing different observation viewpoints, change will already be fostered as a reaction to the observation, even before a conscious decision is taken on the basis of the observations. Proper leadership behaviours on the ground will also foster change. This effect is often underestimated.

Accepting diverse viewpoints

By definition, encouraging the emergence of different viewpoints on the situation will be disturbing as it may question one's personal, current understanding of the situation. It thus requires from managers sufficient openness, and even more, actively seeking uncomfortable feedback and reacting positively to having received such feedback (negative or defensive reactions will discourage future feedback and limit the possibility of issues surfacing). It will also require the ability to be sufficiently flexible in one's priorities and action plans to accommodate the feedback received.

Fostering benevolence

It must be recognised that delivering complex industrial projects is hard and requires a significant personal commitment from all contributors. It is therefore natural that there may be an instinctive resistance to spending time

contributing to those alternative observations, or account for action plans that would result from them. This is why benevolence must always be explicitly expressed during all those interventions, and be part of the processes applied. Input should be taken constructively and it is always important to recognise the effort made by those who bring feedback to the table, and the risk they may feeling they take as messengers.
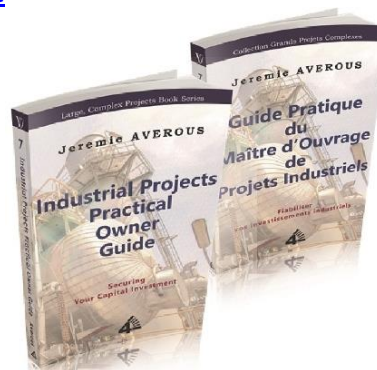
Summary

Fostering systematically independent feedback to generate different viewpoints on various areas of a complex project is essential to its success. There are various areas and scales to achieve this objective. Fostering those observations alone will influence the project, and it is essential to actively encourage independent feedback to constantly interrogate one's current view and understanding. This requires developing benevolence and is finally a major element of the project manager leadership capabilities.