

Project Management in the time of COVID¹

Rethinking Leadership and Governance²

Dr. Lynda Bourne

In March 2020, Australia closed its borders and the whole nation went into lockdown in response to news that COVID-19 had arrived. The virus had been transported by arrivals by air and by water (cruise ships). At the time of writing (April 2022) we are 'living with COVID'; businesses and communities are gradually opening up, but people are still dying with the virus³. We are now dealing with new issues of staff shortages, rising prices and empty shelves in the supermarket. A federal election is looming, and our political leaders are vying to provide solutions for how to repair our economy and improved working conditions and the lives of citizens.

The disruption of the virus reminded people that circumstances can change rapidly⁴ and without warning. This topic was discussed in last month's paper: *Uncertainty – time to rethink?* suggesting that it was time to review pre-pandemic practices, and to consider how we might improve life for ourselves and for our community. This month the subject is governance and leadership – how to use this opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past and re-build our culture and environment – a 'new normal'.

This series: 'Project management in the time of COVID' is primarily about ideas for how organizations and PM practitioners can rethink how PM practice is performed, but any analysis of current applications of governance and leadership must be by its very nature top-down. Projects are selected, funded, and supported to deliver value to an organization as the result of the actions of governments or the actions of the organization. Project governance and project leadership are in most part sub-sets of the organization and environment in which the project work is performed. Projects are developed by and for organizations to support policy, strategy and reforms that often have their origins in the work of Governments to regulate and improve the lives and livelihoods of their citizens.

¹ This series is by Dr. Lynda Bourne, author of the books *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation* (2009), *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders* (2011) and several others. She is a globally-recognized expert on project stakeholder engagement, risk management and other PM-related topics. For more, see her author profile at the end of this article.

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³ There have been more Australian COVID deaths in 2022 than in 2020 and 2021 combined.

⁴ Loria, K. (2021). *Life Lessons from the Pandemic*. www.CR.org, August 2021.

This paper is organized as follows: the first section defines governance and leadership; the next section describes Australia's pre-pandemic environment in terms of those definitions followed by an overview of our first two years of lockdowns. The final section discusses how reviews and reforms of governance and leadership practices may be applied to develop a *new normal* to counteract the problems of the past.

Governance and leadership are mutually inclusive. Leaders define and support good governance, leadership is enhanced by good governance.

Definitions: Governance

Definitions for governance and project governance vary only in the level of detail:

1. Governance encompasses the system by which an organisation is controlled and operates, and the mechanisms by which it, and its people, are held to account. *Ethics, risk management, compliance and administration are all elements of governance.*
Governance Institute of Australia
2. Corporate governance involves *a set of relationships between a company's management, its board, its shareholders and other stakeholders*. Corporate governance also provides the structure through which the objectives of the company and the means of attaining those objectives and monitoring performance are determined. **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**
3. Corporate governance is the framework of rules, relationships, systems and processes within and by which authority is exercised and controlled in corporations. It encompasses the mechanisms by which companies, and those in control, are held to account. **ASX Corporate Governance Council**
4. Project governance is the *management framework within which project decisions are made and outcomes of a project are realized*. Its role is to provide a repeatable and robust system through which an organization can manage its capital investments—project governance handles tasks such as outlining the relationships between all groups involved and describing the flow of information to all stakeholders.
Wikipedia

Key concepts of governance from these definitions are:

- Ethics, risk management, compliance and administration

- Relationships between a company's management, its board, and all its stakeholders
 - A framework of rules, relationships, systems and processes within and by which authority is exercised and controlled in corporations
 - Project governance is focused on decisions about which project are selected and funded and how outcomes of a project are realized

Definitions: Leadership

Literature about leadership is plentiful: a simple search on www.amazon.com provides over 100,000 results for books on leadership; a Google search results in nearly three million. The sheer volume of information and theories and guidelines indicates there are many paths to good leadership⁵.

How to be a good leader is complicated and depends on the personal characteristics of the leader and those being led. To illustrate leadership styles, I have selected two leaders with totally different personal characteristics. Analysis of their leadership actions provides some commonalities. These leaders are Ernest Shackleton – Antarctic expedition leader, and Steve Jobs – founder of Apple.

Sir Ernest Shackleton led an expedition to Antarctica in 1914 in the ship *Endurance*. The *Endurance* was trapped in ice for almost two years, more than 1200 miles from civilization and with no means of communication. The crew was forced to camp on the ice and to eat penguins, seals and their dogs to survive. When the ice began to break up, finally destroying the *Endurance*, Shackleton led his men in three small lifeboats to land on Elephant Island⁶ after nearly a week in the freezing seas. Leaving most of the men sheltering in two lifeboats on the Island, Shackleton proceeded to sail the third lifeboat to a whaling station on the island of South Georgia with five men to seek help. Sixteen days later, they reached land but had to walk a further 32 miles across the spine of the island to reach the whaling station, Shackleton's next move was to organize the rescue effort for his crew waiting on Elephant Island and make the return journey as soon as possible: everybody survived!

From the description of this expedition⁷, much of his leadership style was about developing trust within his crew and recognizing and minimizing conflict. He:

⁵ See Bourne, L. (2015). *Making Projects Work: Effective Stakeholder and Communication Management*. CRC Press, Boca Raton. Many theories and guidelines are described in Chapter 4 pp 89 - 121

⁶ <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/147696/elephant-island>

⁷ Morrell, M., & Capparell, S. (2001). *Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer*. London: Nicholas Brearly.

- Hired the best people and gave them the best conditions that he could provide
- Created a strong team spirit through clarity on all team roles and responsibility, and built team culture through informal gatherings and activities
- Led by example. Shackleton knew the capabilities and weaknesses of his crew, he worked with individual crew members to help them succeed
- Took responsibility for achieving the objectives, kept sight of the big picture while also focusing on the detail and the people
- Left a legacy of successful leadership even when the project did not achieve the objectives of sponsors.

Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, also recognized as an effective leader, displayed completely different characteristics⁸. He cofounded Apple in his parent's garage in 1976, was removed from the company in 1985, returned in 1997 to rescue it. He had character flaws; he was impatient, petulant, and tough with people around him; all in pursuit of perfection. To those who chose to work for him he:

- Developed new industries: personal computing, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing, retail stores, and digital publishing
- Set challenges and trusted his team to realize them
- Simplified complex ideas: he simplified navigation of his devices to no more than three clicks and 'drag and drop'
- Removed 'handoffs' by delegating responsibility for products end to end – an 'ecosystem' of hardware, software and peripherals
- Focused on the big picture but also the details

Shackleton and Jobs had different personal styles, but they had many leadership features in common:

- The ability to inspire their team
- Selection of team members best suited for the work, both in temperament and skills
- Engendered trust in the teams they led
- Communicated in ways that were specific to the needs of their teams; they listened to their teams and were open to their ideas

From analysis of these examples the most useful working definition is essentially brief: *Leadership is the ability to inspire a group of people to achieve a certain goal.*

With these elements of governance and leadership the next step is to apply them to the experiences of Australians throughout the first years of the pandemic: pre-pandemic situation, during the years of lockdowns, 'living with COVID' and building the 'new normal'.

⁸ <https://hbr.org/2012/04/the-real-leadership-lessons-of-steve-jobs>

The Pandemic as watershed

The pandemic is not over – people are still dying and being hospitalized here in Australia. We are now ‘living with COVID’ with a very high percentage of citizens fully vaccinated. This means that office workers can now return to working at the office. But many are reluctant to commute five days a week and are negotiating part-time core hours.

The pandemic was the watershed – as knowledge workers and other office-based workers were forced to work from home (if they had a job), they found that they enjoyed not having to commute – even though there were other burdens of working from home, such as family members competing for study space, assisting children with schooling, issues around shared household responsibilities.

Before COVID⁹

In retrospect we were forced to recognize the issues with pre-pandemic life in Australia. The economy depended greatly on mining; business investment had been shrinking¹⁰. Fewer businesses were being created and the Australians who had jobs were reluctant to change jobs. Despite record low interest rates Australian firms had become more risk-averse, being reluctant to embark on any projects that did not guarantee a high ROI. The conservative Australian Government was obsessed with balancing the budget while reducing taxes. Its goal was to be ‘back in black’, resulting in withdrawal of many government services. The gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ was widening.

Lack of integrity: Government leaders resisted pressure to establish a federal integrity body despite increasing revelations of misuse of public money to gain political advantage, stagnant wage growth and increasing use of casual labour in many areas including unskilled workers, health workers and other caring professions.

Insecure work: Many large employers were underpaying their casual staff – banks, universities as well as fast food franchises and other employers of casual staff. The Australian electorate did not respect or trust their politicians of either side of the spectrum; there was a lack of policy development on either side of the political spectrum.

Climate policy: The Government consistently rejected calls for action on climate change despite bushfires and floods affecting many parts of the country leaving citizens struggling to re-establish their lives.

⁹ The information supporting these descriptions of political and corporate life in Australia during the pandemic are all sourced from the quality journalism of The Conversation: www.theconversation.com.

¹⁰ Lewis, D. 2022. ‘Can-do capitalism’ is delivering less than it did. <https://theconversation.com> April 4, 2022

During – 2020 to 2021

Failures of governance and leadership were in the spotlight throughout the last two years. The federal Government was slow to provide financial support to workers who had either lost their job or whose employment was suspended during lockdown. Eventually support was provided for many businesses to continue to pay workers stood down during lockdowns; universities were a notable exception. By 2021 however, business leaders of enterprises from small to large were crying out for the end of lockdowns, particularly after vaccines became available.

Time to seize the opportunities? 2022 to beyond

‘Living with COVID’ is not ambitious enough. Governments and organizations need to review and reform their practices to increase trust, promote integrity, improve job security and reduce the wage disparity between executives and front-line workers.

The reluctance of workers to come into the CBD of any major city will affect transportation infrastructure projects, requiring defunding of some and reconfiguration of others. That funding and those projects may need to be re-directed to the regional cities – many residents of capital cities have moved to cheaper regional areas, increasing the need for housing and infrastructure in those regions. Decreased migration, and where the new arrivals will decide to live, and work will also affect future infrastructure projects.

The changing needs of leadership

Information from surveys conducted by coaching companies indicates areas that leaders needed to focus on in 2013¹¹. The top five areas were:

- Conflict management skills
- Listening skills
- Delegation
- Planning
- Mentoring and succession planning

A more recent survey¹² lists the current areas of recognized need:

- Flexibility to adapt to a new world of organizational life and assist teams to adapt

¹¹ Gavett, G., 2013. *What areas are CEOs getting coaching in?* HBR.org August 15, 2013

¹² Library of Professional Coaching, 2021. *Hot topics in executive coaching*. Nov, 2021.

<https://libraryofprofessionalcoaching.com/research/master-coaches-identify-hot-topics-in-executive-coaching/>
(downloaded April, 2022)

- To develop solutions for issues of hybrid work and virtual teams, global economic impacts, supply chain issues, labour shortages.
- Knowledge capture of retiring workers
- Mentoring new managers needed to replace retiring ‘grey hairs’, many of whom have not had the opportunity to attain relevant experiences in leading teams or making management decisions.
- How to exploit AI to advantage both workers and the organization and adapt to the world of development of digital products
- New brain science: how the brain works and how leaders must use this to continue to develop workers

The stakes are high for leaders reexamining strategic direction and vision while in an environment of uncertainty, and the requirement to manage ambiguity and conflict. Employers, managers and leaders must be prepared to address the high anxiety of their workers and help them prepare for inevitable changes in how outcomes are achieved when the rules are changing.

PwC¹³ suggest that priorities are emerging to:

- Protect anxious people who are reluctant to come back to working full-time in an office environment
- Communicate effectively to reduce anxiety, listen to the needs and concerns of workers
- Maintain continuity of work despite loss of experienced workforce
- Assess workforce costs, develop business cases to ensure that training needs of inexperienced staff are understood and met
- Prepare for recovery – work with industry and change management experts to map out some versions of what the ‘new normal’ might look like, develop strategies in consultation with employees and other stakeholders to minimize negative consequences of the transition efforts.

Organizations can help project teams deliver business value in the ‘new normal’ through initiatives to:

- Retain important workers with greater job security and improved wages and conditions.
- Acknowledge that many workers are stressed by economic uncertainty. Recognize and manage ‘psycho-social risk factors’¹⁴ that include high workloads, exposure to emotional distress at work, tight deadlines, lack of control or role clarity, and poor support pathways.

¹³ PwC, 2021. *Leaders need professional coaching now more than ever*. March 2021

¹⁴ Sutherland, D. *The overwork pandemic: Ashely Bloomfield’s resignation highlights burnout on the COVID-19 front line*. www.theconversation.com retrieved April 13, 2022

- Ensure conditions can adapt to flexibility in work environment and work hours, assist returning workers develop new work practices to ensure work-life balance is maintained
- Enhance organizational reputation to make it a preferred place of employment and to do business with; enhance Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies and actions.
- Develop mentoring programs and succession plans to develop leaders for the new environment
- Rethink how projects are selected, funded, supported and implemented, bearing in mind staff shortages, skills shortages, material shortages.
- Enhance organizational and project governance activities and audit regularly for compliance
- Review and rethink code of conduct to establish integrity as a preferred characteristic.

Conclusion

The definitions of governance and leadership do not need to change – they are robust and clear; the purpose of this paper is, in part, to remind us all of the importance of good governance and strong leadership. What needs to change is compliance by business and government through review of that compliance and reform of practices and legislation to ensure a higher level of compliance.

Improving how we select, fund, support and implement projects depends very much on the health and strength of the organizations they are funded to support. In this time of uncertainty any attempts that organizations might make to review and reform how they manage their products, services, stakeholders and reputation will also depend on government reforms.

Within projects, leadership and good governance are just as important, often reflecting what is happening in the organization, but sometimes project managers will need to take the initiative and actually lead the organization in promoting these essentials.

Relationship management and engagement of stakeholders are key to project success, now more than ever. Next month the focus will be on identification of stakeholders and their needs and expectations, in particular project team members, most severely affected by the pandemic and its aftermath.

About the Author



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Lynda Bourne DPM, FACS is a senior management consultant, professional speaker, teacher and an award-winning project manager with 50 years professional industry experience. She has been focussed on the delivery of stakeholder management and other project related consultancy, mentoring and training for clients world-wide.

She has presented at conferences and seminars in South America, Europe, Russia, Asia, New Zealand and Australia to audiences of industry leaders and project managers in the IT, construction, defence and mining industries and has been keynote speaker at meetings and workshops within organisations in the finance and utilities sector.

In 2010 she was engaged as visiting professor at EAN University, Bogota, Colombia, teaching leadership in the Masters of PM Program for five years. Most recently she was a member of the Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, lecturing in IT management subjects, in particular, stakeholder management, communication and leadership.

Lynda Bourne has authored the following books:

- *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2009)
- *Project Relationship Management and the Stakeholder Circle: A guide for developing stakeholder management maturity in organisations* (2010)
- *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2011)
- *Making projects and programs work: What really matters for achieving successful project and program outcomes* (2015)

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