Leadership: Responding to complexity

A SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONDING TO COMPLEXITY IN GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION AND SERVICE DELIVERY PROJECTS

KEYWORDS

- **Leadership**
- **Complexity**
- **Major projects**
- **Transformation**

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Background

Major government projects represent some of the most complex and diverse projects delivered by organisations in the UK and internationally. Transformation and service delivery projects represent almost a third of the government's major projects portfolio in terms of the number of projects[1].

These projects provide the opportunity to deliver significant benefits to the public as they are concerned with improving public services and making the government more efficient. Yet, as the National Audit Office has highlighted, delivering these projects can be very challenging[2]. The efforts undertaken so far to develop leaders of major projects through initiatives such as the Major Projects Leadership Academy (MPLA) have provided a solid foundation for developing individual competencies. However, insights generated by the academic leadership literature suggest that leading organisations through change requires systemic leadership capabilities.

This research seeks to generate insights from project delivery professionals with significant experience in the delivery of the government's transformation and service delivery portfolios, programmes and projects. The research aims to provide a systemic leadership framework for responding to complexity that can be practical and useful for practitioners, organisations and policy makers. This research is part of a broader research agenda within Project X, which aims to generate insights into leadership in the government's major project portfolio.

[1] The 2018 Annual Report on the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP) from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA).

[2] NAO (2015) *Lessons for Major Service Transformation*, London: NAO.

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Approach

This qualitative case study views leadership as an activity, rather than focusing on the competencies or styles of individuals holding leadership positions. This view, based on what the academic literature refers to as leadership-as-practice approaches, focuses on what is being accomplished and how it is accomplished over time, rather than who the leaders are and what they do.

This view accommodates the contributions of the individuals appointed to formal leadership positions in portfolios, programmes and projects. However, it also recognises the alternative sources of leadership that may or may not be situated within the boundaries of the portfolios, programmes and projects.

Viewing leadership as an activity also provides sensitivity to how material objects and social and cultural conditions can act as enablers or constraints. Therefore, activity views of leadership are well suited for confronting broader sources of complexity and developing systemic responses.

The case study report is based on 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with a cross-section of project delivery professionals working in the major transformation portfolios of two central government departments. The data gathered also includes informal interviews and documents available in the public domain. The analysis adopted the theoretical lens of routines as it enables the examination of both formal leadership activities and their improvisations in responding to complexity.

Research findings

The framework developed as a result of the analysis constitutes four complexity response systems that consist of multiple leaders and structural elements that span across multiple levels and are able to dynamically adapt to emergence:

■ **Bridging**
Responding to complexities associated with integrating knowledge across different functions or organisations by developing trading zones.

■ **Positioning**
Structuring leadership roles and relationships for responding to the threats and opportunities associated with the specific authority positions that portfolio, programme or project managers take in their relationships with others.

■ **Legitimising**
Responding to the different evaluations of desirability, properness and appropriateness of the intended change and how it is delivered by developing opinion formation systems.

■ **Adapting**
Responding to the shifts in context that impacts formal agreements produced at the front-end phase of projects or programmes through anticipation and shared leadership strategies. Also responding to organisational changes to ways of working in portfolios, programmes and projects through translation strategies.

Next steps

The framework developed requires tailoring for the complexities relevant to the specific context of the portfolios, programmes and projects. It is recommended that portfolios assess local complexities through collective inquiry and develop their complexity response systems accordingly. Drawing on the insights from the academic literature, the report also offers recommendations for further strengthening the framework.