

Adaptation Strategies For Project Managers

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Abstract

The public sector has a questionable reputation on their ability to complete large IT projects on time and within budget. In this research the influence of political involvement to project managers' adaptive behavior is investigated. For this purpose the Coping model of Project Managers Adaptation (CMPMA) has been created. This model, – derived from Beaudry and Pinsonneault (2005) – provides insight into the adaptive behavior of IT project managers in situations of political involvement. The adaptive behavior is grouped in to four general adaptation strategies: benefits maximizing, benefits satisfying, disturbance handling and self-preservation strategy.

The CMPMA is able to explain all events of political involvement. Meaning, whenever political involvement leads to an outcome, all project manager's adaptive behavior and their associated outcomes can be explained with this model. The model opens the black box of IT project management – within the Dutch government – and can be used as an instrument, by civil servants, for managing IT projects.

Keywords: *IT project management, political involvement, and adaptation strategies.*

Introduction

Governmental projects fail for a wide variety of reasons. Often, it concerns IT projects. Experts believe the government is spending five billion euro (annually) on failed IT projects (Zwaap, 2009). In recent years more has become known about the causes of failed projects within the Dutch government. According to the Netherlands Court of Audit, political complexity is one of the causes identified (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2007)

Within the field of project management there has been little discourse on project politics, project managers behaviors and how those two entities impact the project outcome. To date, some researchers touch upon this issue but, do not address them. Therefore, practitioners and researchers are confronted with a critical task of explaining why and how project managers will react to political involvement. However, relatively less is known regarding this subject.

In this study political involvement is defined as an event that affects the project and is induced by the Minister, State Secretary and/or senior civil servants (Secretary General and Director General).

Pinto (2000) describes how politics and project management are two processes which, while very different, are also inextricably linked. Project managers do not have the luxury of turning their back on organizational politics. Pinto argues, successful project managers are keenly aware that politics, used judiciously, can have an extraordinary positive impact on the implementation of their projects.

Sense (2003) created a model of the politics of project manager learning. The model describes the interplay of political issues and the learning activity of the project manager, but fail to describe any form of adaptation.

Kundi *et al.* (2007) describe the Politicization/De-Politicization Model that depicts how de-politicizing efforts can moderate political resistance towards project success. In their model they present the 'essentials for an IT project' as independent variable, 'political resistance' as intervening variable and 'successful IT project' as dependent variable. The intervening variable is moderated by 'de-politicizing efforts'. To achieve de-politicizing, the authors give one general advice; analyze the organizational power distribution and the potential threats, by imitating new change. Kundi *et al.* (2007) recognize that a manager needs an instrument for negotiating purposes between different parties, but do not provide such instrument.

Reading guide

This article begins with an elaboration of the coping theory. This section explains how an individual copes with a disruptive event. Next the CMPMA is presented. Here, the four adaptation strategies are explained. The following sections explain the research method, summarizes the observations and present the analysis. Hereafter the findings are presented and the last section discloses the limitations of the study.

Coping theory

An individual copes with disruption by using two key sub-processes that continuously influence each other. First, the individual evaluates the potential consequences of an event (*appraisal*), and assesses the nature of the occurred event and its personal importance and relevance (*primary appraisal*). In other words, when a disruption occurs, one first asks: "what is at stake for me in this situation?"

In addition, to assessing the importance of an event, individuals also evaluate the options available to them (*secondary appraisal*). They determine the level of control they can exert over the situation and what they feel they can do about it given the resources available to them.

Reference model

To examine the adaptive behavior of project managers to political involvement, the Coping Model of User Adaptation (CMUA), created by Beaudry and Pinsonneault, is used as reference model. This model relates an event to an adaptation and couples adaptation to an outcome. Although CMUA focuses on the user's adaption's to new IT systems, the structure and dynamics of the model haven proved their merits¹.

¹ Elie-Dit-Cosaque (2009) described the User adaption the Coping Model of User Adaptations as 'ground-breaking'. During his PhD research he tested whether Beaudry and Pinsonneault's results hold with another sample and concludes 'our research suggests that the overall model was well supported.'

Coping Model of Project Managers Adaptations

The reference model of Beaudry and Pinsonneault is adjusted to create the Coping Model of Project Managers Adaptations (CMPMA). For simplification purposes disruptions are only divided in to positive or negative events. After the appraisal, the model identifies four adaptation strategies (benefits maximizing, benefits satisfying, disturbance handling, and self-preservation) and five outcomes. Figure one depicts the CMPMA.

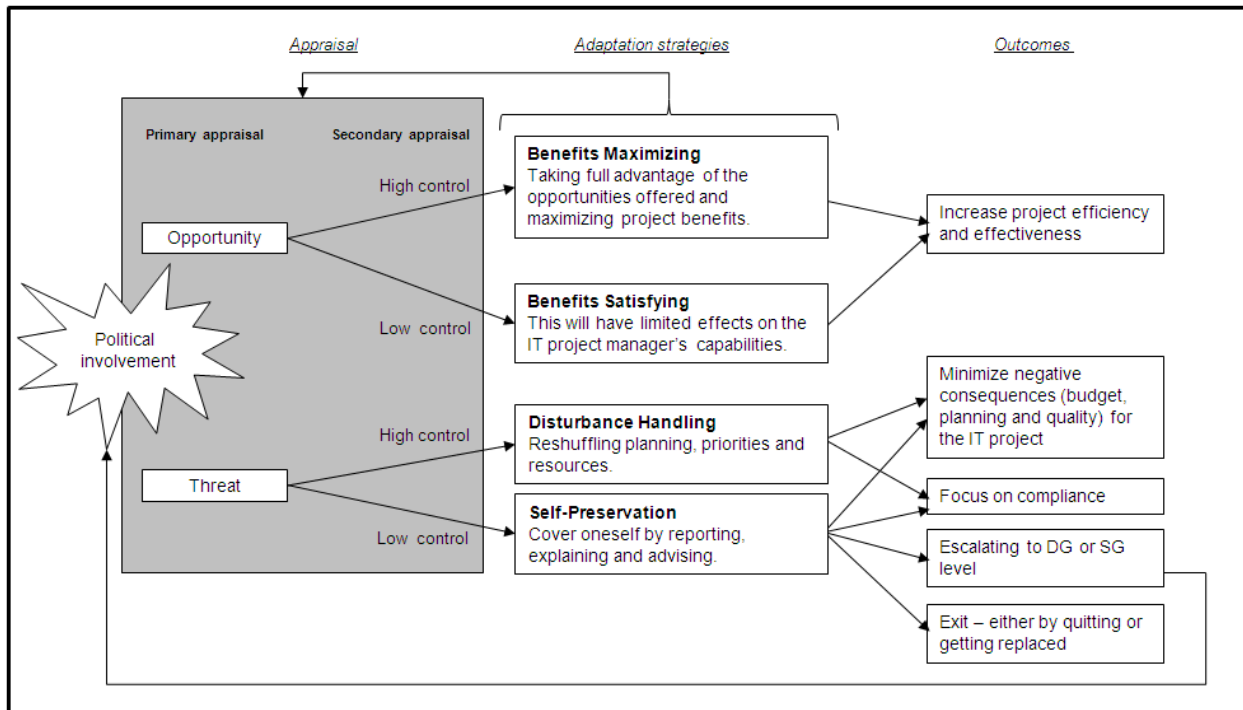


Figure 1 – Coping Model of Project Managers Adaptations

For thorough understanding each strategy is explained separately.

Benefits Maximizing Strategy

When the perceived consequences of political involvement are appraised as an opportunity and project managers feel that they have control over the situation, they will engage in a *benefit maximizing strategy*, which will *increase the projects efficiency and effectiveness*.

This strategy is derived from the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBok), that recognizes contingency planning and describes strategies for positive risks or opportunities (PMI, 2004). One of these strategies is 'exploit'. By exploiting these positive risks project manager can increase the projects efficiency and effectiveness.

Benefits Satisfying Strategy

When the perceived consequences of political involvement are appraised as an opportunity and project managers feel that they have limited control over the situation, they will engage in Benefits Satisfying strategy. This strategy will have limited effect on the project manager adaptation behavior, but will *increase its efficiency and effectiveness*. For example, a principal often has to choose how he allocates his resources. During this allocation process priorities are balanced. A project manager can influence this prioritizing by declaring needs and by providing advice.

Disturbance Handling Strategy

When the perceived consequences of political involvement are appraised as a threat and project managers feel that they have control over the situation, they will engage in *Disturbance Handling* strategy, which is twofold. First, it can *minimize negative consequences for the project*. Second, it can also lead to *focus on compliance*.

This strategy is derived from the Harvard Business School (HBS) (1997), that describes how project managers can cope with unexpected events by means of sensible analysis and reasonable judgments. If applied successfully it leads to *minimization of negative consequences for the project*.

The remaining outcome of the Disturbance Handling strategy is based on outcomes described by Hirschman (1970). He provided an array of possibilities how an organization or employees/customer should react on (top) management behavior. In his book, titled 'Exit, Voice and Loyalty', Loyalty is reasoned as dissatisfied employees who are dependent and therefore do as told. In this research this kind of behavior is considered *focus on compliance*.

Self-Preservation Strategy

When the perceived consequences of political involvement are appraised as a threat and project managers feel that they have limited control over the situation, they will engage in *self-preservation strategy*, which is four-footed. First, it can minimize negative consequences for the project. Second, it can lead to a replacement or voluntary resignation of the project manager. Third, it can lead to a focus on compliance. Fourth, and last, it could lead to escalation.

This adaptation strategy is applied by project managers when the induced event has significant negative impact for the project. Because the project manager feels he has limited control, he could advise, escalate, communicate, report or explain the situation to his principal.

Hirschman's remaining outcomes 'Exit' and 'Voice' are also associated as an outcome of the Self-Preservation strategy. Exit is reasoned leaving the organization because of dissatisfaction towards (top) management and voice is reasoned as the employees who escalate higher into the organization, because they are used to 'better' treatment. All three outcomes presented by Hirschman are included in the CMPMA; *exit* (Exit), *escalation* (Voice) and *focus on compliance* (Loyalty). Together with 'minimize

negative consequences' (explained in Disturbance Handling) Hirschman's theory represents the outcomes of this strategy.

Feedback loop

When the self-preservation strategy, leads to escalation it could again result in political involvement. Hence the feedback arrow after escalating toward political involvement (figure 1 – Coping Model of Project Manager Adaptations).

Project managers' adaptation process as whole

The CMPMA is iterative and continually evolves as a function of the ongoing changes that occur in the project manager and project environment relationship. Appraisals influence the adaptive behavior that are likely to be performed, which in turn lead to the reappraisal of the situation. This is illustrated in figure 1 by the arrow that goes from adaptation strategies back to appraisal.

Research Method²

In order to test to Coping Model of Project Managers Adaptation (CMPMA) the researcher focused on the IT project manager. This person plays the pivotal role between the organization and the IT project. During the information system development process their adaptive behavior to political involvement formed the basis of this study. Government-wide four explanatory case studies have been conducted. Data was gathered by conducting interviews with the project managers. The interviews were verified with the inspection of public documents used by the House of Representatives. Moreover, for both interview transcriptions and interview analyses explicit approval of each project manager has been received. The grounded theory analyses procedure of Strauss and Corbin (1990) was followed to subtract relevant information from the interview transcriptions. Furthermore, the analysis of one case has been replicated, by an independent reviewer, to increase the reliability of this research.

² The complete description of each case study, validity measures, interview questionnaire and analyses procedures can be retrieved upon request by the author. All names of projects and people involved in the case study are obscured and replaced by an alias to prevent individuals involved from unintended disclosure.

Observations

The four cases examined yielded seventeen observations. The table 1 presents a frequency overview of adaptation strategies observed. The Self-Preservation strategy is the most prevailing strategy, which corresponds to 35.3% of all events identified. This strategy is followed by Benefits Maximizing (29.4%), Benefits Satisfying (17.6%) and Disturbance Handling strategy (5.9%). The iterative strategies (11.8%) are exceptions and will be discussed separately in the next section.

	Political events identified	Benefit maximizing	Benefit Satisfying	Disturbance handling	Self-Preservation	Iterative strategies
Frequency	17	5	3	1	6	2
% of n = 17	100	29.4	17.6	5.9	35.3	11.8

Table 1 – Adaptation strategy frequencies

The adaptation strategies observed are closely connected with the outcomes. The observed outcomes are presented in table 2. Here the most frequent observed outcome is increase project efficiency and effectiveness, that accounts for 47.1% of all events identified. The percentage is a combination of the Benefits Maximizing and Benefits Satisfying strategy shown in table 1.

	Political event identified	Increase project efficiency and effectiveness	Minimize negative consequences for the project	Focus on compliance	Escalating to DG or SG level	Exit (either by quitting or getting replaced)	Feedback loop
	17	8	5	2	1	0	1
% of n = 17	100	47	29.4	11.8	5.9	0	5.9

Table 2 – Outcome frequencies

To fully understand table 1 and 2, figure 2 must be taken into account. This figure depicts all events identified within the CMPMA, and serves as a bridge that connects table 1 with table 2. For instance, when glancing at figure 2 it becomes clear that the Self-Preservation strategy, with an frequency of 35.3% (table 1) is consist of 'Minimize negative consequences for the project', 'Focus on compliance', 'Escalating' and 'Feedback loop'.

The frequency of each path is also denoted at the end of each path. Figure 2 also depicts two iterative adaptations as (red and orange) dotted lines, which coincides with the two iterative adaptations described in table 1.

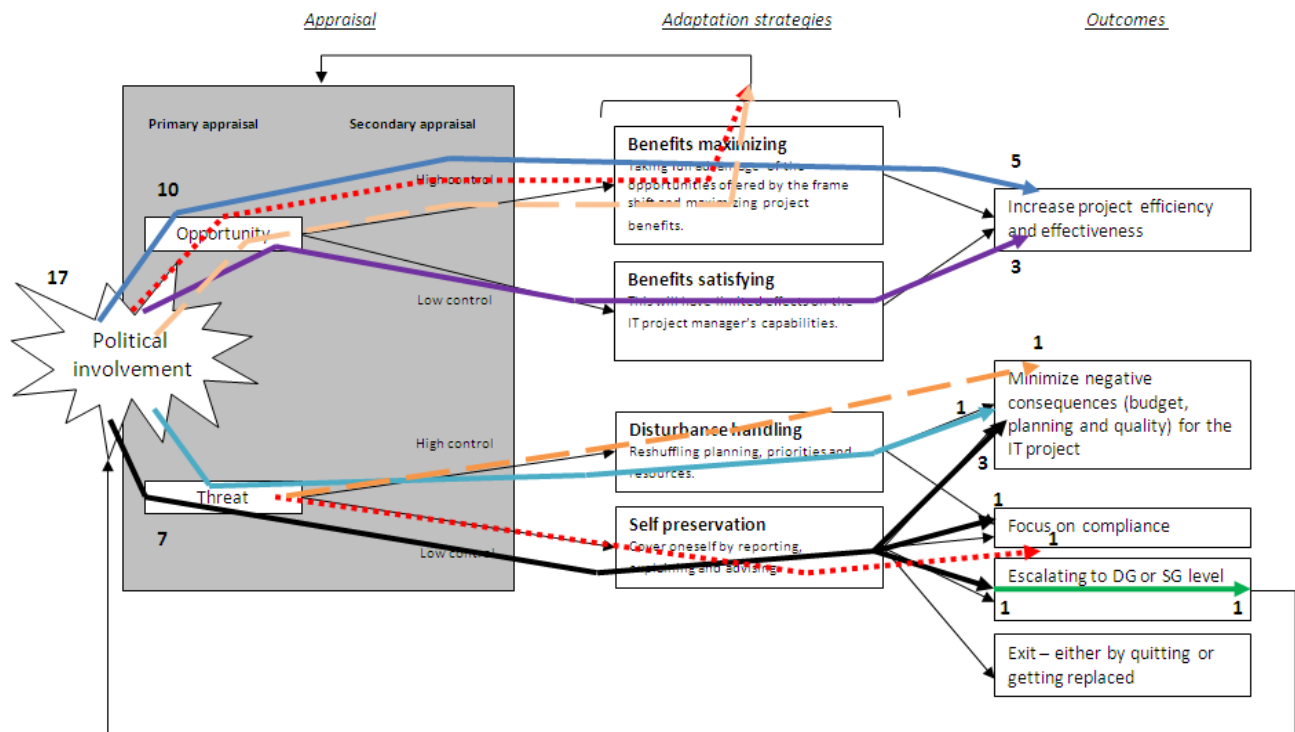


Figure 2 – Observed outcomes

Analysis

Notice how all seventeen events occurred in figure 2 can be explained within the model. In other words, when political involvement leads to an outcome, all adaptation strategies and outcomes can be explained via the model.

The solid lines (blue, light blue, black, purple and green) coincide with the adaptation strategies described in the section Coping Model of Project Managers Adaptation of this article. Meaning, the project managers followed the expected path set forth by the CMPMA from 'appraisal' till 'outcome'. The dotted lines (called iterative strategies), are intuitively less easy to understand and require more explanation.

Iterative strategies

Iterative strategies are strategies that are initially appraised wrong, but are reappraised accordingly. In figure 2 the dotted lines that go through the benefits maximizing strategy toward the arrow that leads back to the appraisal. Afterwards these dotted lines start from 'threat' (that is the reappraisal of the situation) toward a different adaptation strategy and outcome.

The question remains, what the reason is behind these iterative strategies. Why are these events falsely appraised as opportunity? When analyzing the interview transcriptions, it became clear that the project managers perceived political involvement from a social perspective instead of a project perspective. The differences between the two are small, yet important. When the project manager reasons from a social perspective, he emphasizes what consequences the event might have for the citizens. On the contrary,

when the project manager reasons from a project perspective, he emphasizes consequences for the project. These perspectives are made visible in figure 3.

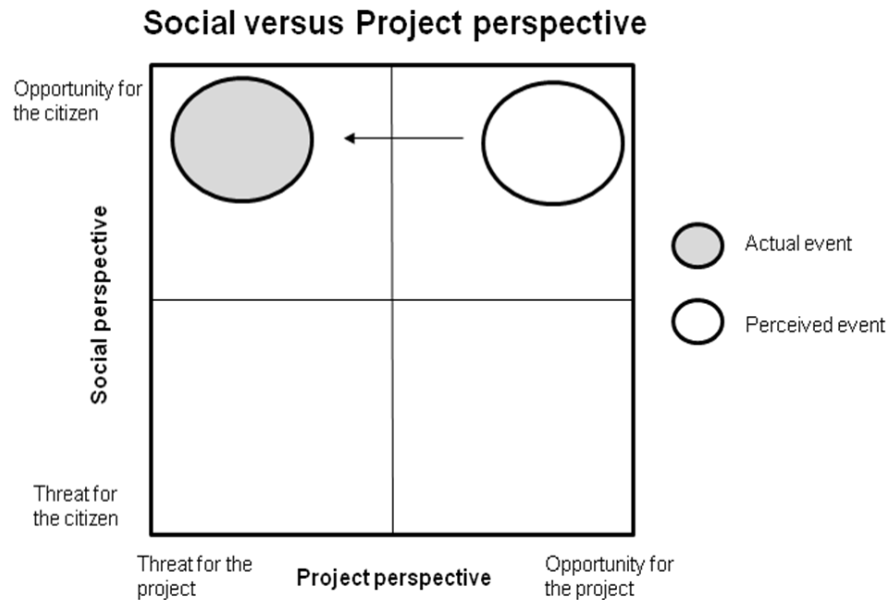


Figure 3 – Social versus Project perspective

A reason behind these iterative strategies is what is called ‘project managers optimism’. Schaafsma, Spangenberg and Williams (2007) describe optimistic behavior as, ‘failure to acknowledge the reality of recent experience, leading to a too optimistic view of the reality’. This finding is underlined by the project management manual of the HBS (1997) and Sengputa, Adbel-Hamid and Wassehove (2008), who also questioned project managers optimism.

Although no financial effects of political involvement have been measured within this research, one can imagine the consequences of these iterative strategies. Project managers who continuously make erroneous appraisals of political involvement, could unintentionally jeopardize project success. Because, by the time the project manager corrects his misjudgement, precious project time and money will be lost.

Findings

This research examined the effect of political involvement to the adaptive behavior of project managers. The researcher concludes, while the project managers individual appraisals on political involvement may vary, their adaptive behavior can be grouped in to four broad adaptation strategies (benefits maximizing, benefits satisfying, disturbance handling and self-preservation strategy). Furthermore, the Coping Model of Project Managers Adaptation is able to explain all events identified. Even when a project manager accidentally misjudged an event, the flexibility of the model was able to explain the adaptation. Finally, the research indicated how optimistic project managers caused iterative strategies to occur.

The model represents the baseline of project manager adaptations, in a complex world where people can be atypical in an infinite number of ways. In order to learn from political involvement, knowing what happens on average is a good place to start.

Contribution

This research contributes to the knowledge of IT project management by describing dynamics surrounding the (governmental) project managers and the steps practiced by these managers when induced to political involvement. It is of paramount importance that project managers and their principals understand how political involvement will affect the project. The CMPMA is an instrument that will support principals in this task. Furthermore, with this acquired insight principals can promote the adaptation strategy or outcome they desire.

Recommendations

First and foremost, project managers should include political involvement into their risk management strategy. By doing so, more awareness is created regarding the impact of political involvement on a project. Furthermore, the CMPMA can be used to educate the project managers³. For example, the principal could point out how misjudged events could lead to a delay.

Limitations

The researcher recognizes several limitations of this study. First, the sample size of four projects that yielded seventeen observations, might be too small to fully justify the model. A single change in observed events would alter the frequency percentages significantly (table 1). Second, no attention is paid to exclude cultural differences between departments and project managers. Finally, the data set consisted

³ Currently, a course is developed, by the department of domestic affairs, that will educate project managers to cope with politics (Kiebert and Werff, 2011). The course underlines the need for project managers to understand the political environment. This might help project managers in their quest to estimate the affects political involvement. As result less iterative strategies could be expected.

out of projects which were more or less considered successful. Challenged IT projects might very well lead to interesting findings. While such limitations tend to influence the result, the researcher believes the model has the capability to shed significant light in the area of politics and project managers' behavior.

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