

Integral Project Management – The Next Step in the Development of Project Management Excellence

The collective opinion of project managers consistently identifies leadership, team development and communications at the top of the list of knowledge, skills and attributes required for the performance of successful projects. However, while there is agreement on what is required, the development of project managers and project teams through current approaches to training does not reliably deliver improved performance.

This paper looks outside of the project management profession to current developments in the disciplines of philosophy and psychology for some new thinking on how best to address the *soft issues* in the project environment. Emotional Intelligence and Integral Theory are examined as the foundation for a new approach to more successful projects through the development of Integral Project Management.

Introduction

Leadership, team development and communication consistently top the list of knowledge, skills and personal attributes considered necessary for project success¹. There are numerous books and training courses designed to improve these important aspects. However, most of these are knowledge based and mechanistic. Simply following the steps in process fashion does not necessarily deliver the desired outcomes. Knowledge based training in these subjects does not reliably achieve improved performance. How then, are the skills and personal attributes to be developed?

There is general recognition that the management of people, the human factor, is critical to project success. However, these so-called '*soft issues*', up until now, have not had a solid theoretical and practical framework for either developing these skills or applying them in a project environment.

Looking Outside the Profession

Perhaps the profession needs to be less introspective and look beyond the project management environment to see what is happening in other disciplines for guidance and clues to the possibilities of how the profession might develop. There are many places to look but in the field of human resource management, the study of psychology and philosophy offer some promise and reflect what I have found to be of the most value. There are two areas of particular interest that appear to neatly intersect - Integral Theory and Emotional Intelligence. Both of these provide solidly researched theoretical frameworks to inform assessment, training and practice.

Integral Theory

The first area, Integral Theory, as presented by Ken Wilber (founder of the Integral Institute, see www.integralinstitute.org) is from the disciplines of philosophy and psychology. Wilber's writings attempt to highlight the connections between as many areas of human endeavour and knowledge as possible. Some of his more audacious titles include 'A Theory of Everything', and 'A Brief History of Everything'. Wilber is the most published academic author in the United States and his work has now been published in over 24 languages.

Integral Theory may appear a little abstract to the reader at first, but once some of the basic tenets are understood, the power of Integral Theory and its applicability to the project management environment may be appreciated.

Integral Theory is based on the proposition that fundamentally, every knowable thing can be conceived as a *holon*. A holon is complete in itself (whole) but it also forms part of a larger whole. Thus, a holon is both part and whole. For example, an atom is complete in itself but is a part of a molecule, which can be a part of any number of physical structures. Other examples are that an individual human is a part of a family, and also part of a community that is part of a country. A letter is part of a word, which is part of a sentence, which is a part of a paragraph, which is also part of an article or story in a higher level or broader context.

The basic structure of all things is therefore a *holarchy*. A holarchy is like a hierarchy, but it actually occurs naturally. Maintaining a self-organising balance, a holarchy is a series of wholes, which are part of other broader contexts or wholes, and this series develops indefinitely.

Wilber’s analysis concludes that if a holon fails to balance its wholeness and communion with others at its level, then it will collapse and cease to exist. If it ceases to exist, the consequences are that everything above it in the holarchy would also collapse³. For example, if a hydrogen molecule were to collapse then so too would the water or other structures it comprised; if a letter ceased to exist then so would the word, sentence and paragraph it was in.

Wilber observes that **each holon (and every holarchy) has at least four fundamental, different, irreducible dimensions of existence**. These can be seen as four types of ‘truth’, actively pursued by different disciplines. These are illustrated in Figure 1.

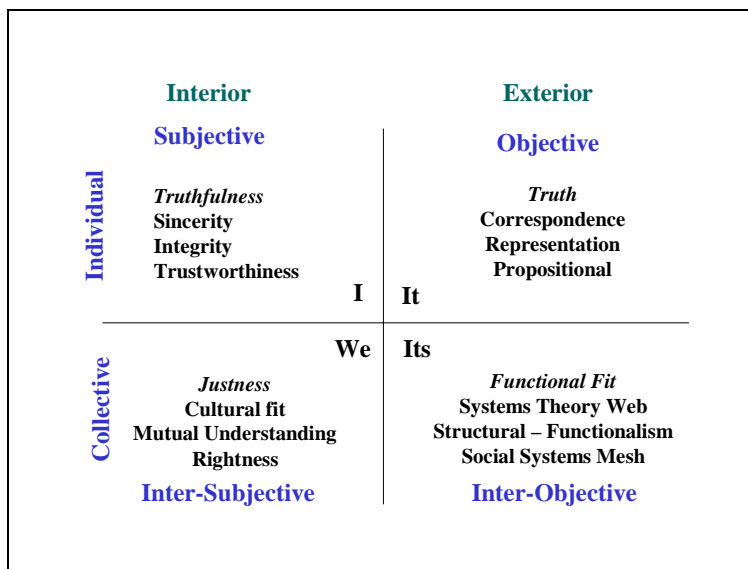


Figure 1 – Wilber’s Four Quadrants of Every Holon

Wilber’s proposition is that each of the four quadrants of each holon **must develop in balance with each other** (or tetra-evolve). If one quadrant develops at a faster rate than the others, the holon will exhibit unhealthy distortions retarding the holon’s functionality with the other holons at its level and above. Eventually, the holarchy will collapse back to a level of balance before it can undertake further sustained development.

There are many examples where this has occurred. One example, from an historical perspective, is that the church, the principal keeper of societies values, once dominated also the individual, science and the state. This dominance was out of balance and it restricted the development of the individual, science and societies. Eventually, the power of the church collapsed paving the way to revolutionary scientific enlightenment. Science caught up, however empirical science currently tends to dominate most human endeavours in the modern world. See Figure 2.

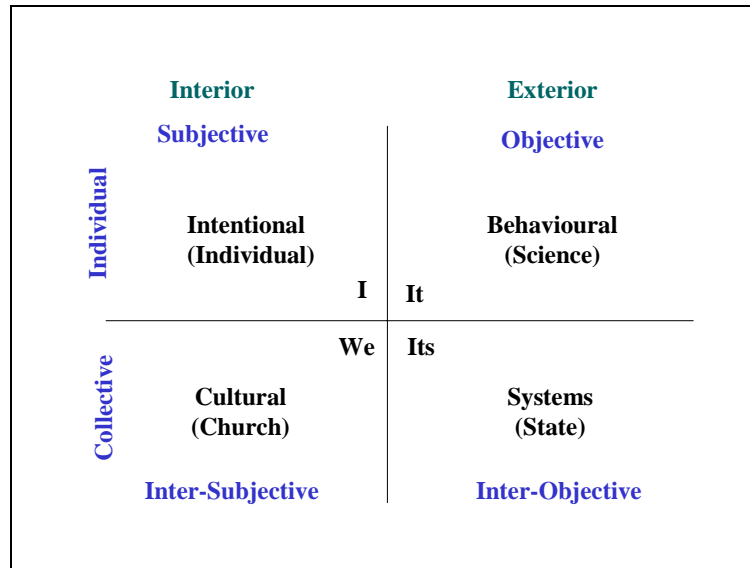


Figure 2 – An example

How does Integral Theory relate to Project Management?

If project management is viewed as a holon, then the characteristics of the right two quadrants are a project's behaviour and systems. They are the aspects only described in "It" and "Its" language, the "hard issues", and they are observable, quantifiable, and measurable. The behavioral, top right quadrant or "It" includes cost, time and other resource estimates and actualities, work breakdown structures, scheduling, and specific risks. The systems, lower right quadrant or "Its", includes project management systems, such as, the risk management system, cost capture systems, quality management system and earned value systems.

The overall characteristics of these *hard issues* on the right side, the technical and systems side of project management, are that they are objectively definable. They are measurable, quantifiable, and definable. In essence, they are observed and measured on their surface characteristics and can be readily identified. They are relatively easy to teach and learn, and from a competency standard perspective, they are relatively easy to monitor and measure.

The top left quadrant or "I" is directly related to the individual project manager or individual project team members; their individual skills, experiences, strengths and weaknesses, attitudes and motivation. The bottom left quadrant or "We", is the project team and includes team values, culture and norms. The project management quadrants may appear as illustrated in Figure 3.

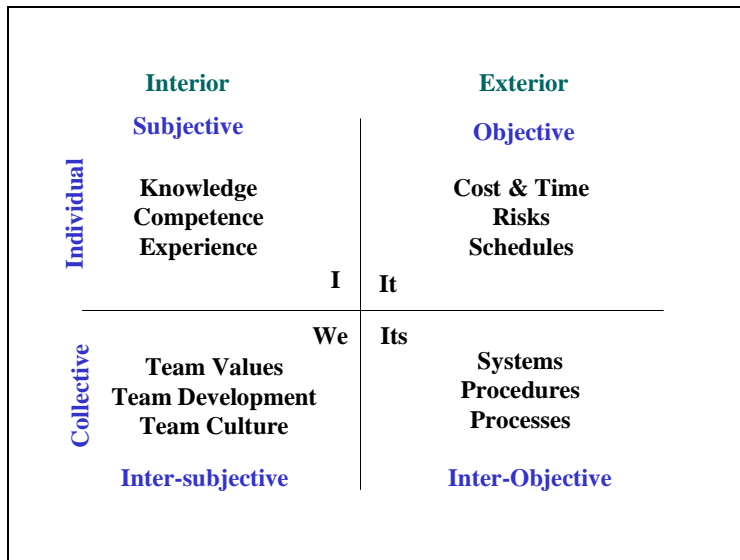


Figure 3 – The Project Management Quadrants

The overall characteristics of the left side, the *soft issues*, are that they are qualitative and represent the subjective perspective and experience of humans; as individuals and collectively as cultures. While some individual skills can be objectively observed, they predominantly require interpretation. Humans, other than their external characteristics, are not as easily measured and observed - they have depth. Communication is required to find out just what is happening. However, the communication process involves interpretative frameworks or filters for each participant. We speak through filters and listen through filters and these can distort or obscure the true meaning or intent of the communication, both conscious and unconscious. Both the speaker and listener interpret according to their own experience and filters, and both are also impacted by their individual emotional states, or feelings, at that moment in time.

Another difficulty with the *soft issues* is that they are not easily definable, and there is greater difficulty in teaching and learning how to improve individual and team characteristics, particularly from a knowledge perspective. The *soft* and *hard* aspects are shown as an over-lay in Figure 4.

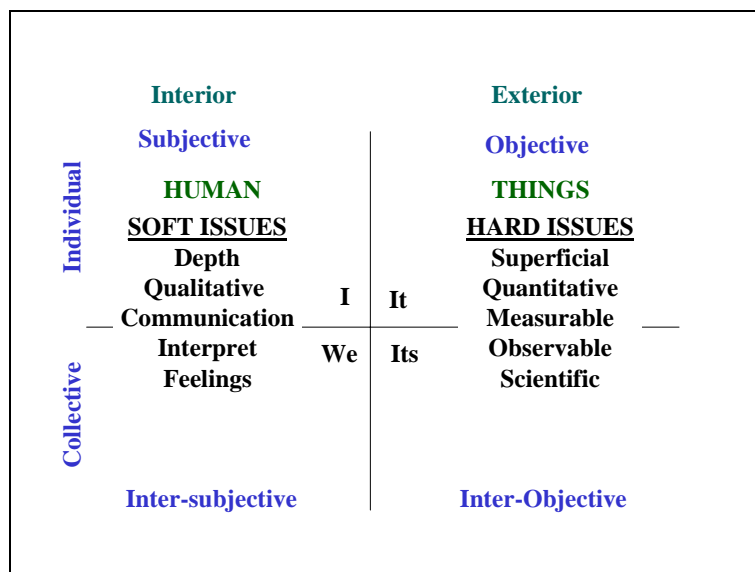


Figure 4 – Soft and Hard Issues

If current project management practice were reviewed as a holon, then a critical review would suggest an imbalance between the *soft* and *hard* aspects of projects. The further development of the technical skills, processes and systems should not be restrained, but rather, our individual project leadership and team development skills require greater development. Emotional Intelligence provides a means to address the imbalance.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence is from the discipline of Psychology. In 1995, Daniel Goleman wrote a book titled “Emotional Intelligence”² outlining the compelling case for Emotional Intelligence or EI (also referred to as EQ), as the critical factor in what sets top performers and teams apart. Research has shown that:

- Top performers have an EI ratio of 2:1 to technical skills
- EI accounts for 85% of what sets top project leaders apart from their peers
- Project teams with leaders with a high EI perform 20% above other teams

Goleman defines EI as “*the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships*”. EI describes abilities distinct from, but complimentary to, academic intelligence, the purely cognitive capacities measured by IQ. Current research on EI can be seen at www.eiconsortium.org.

Goleman’s original description of the EI competencies is:

| <i>Personal Competencies</i> | <i>Social Competencies</i> |
|---|--|
| <p>Self Awareness Emotional Awareness Accurate Self-Assessment Self Confidence Intuition</p> <p>Self Regulation Self Control Trustworthiness Conscientiousness Adaptability Innovation</p> <p>Motivation Achievement Drive Commitment Initiative Optimism</p> | <p>Empathy Understanding Others Developing Others Service Orientation Leveraging Diversity Political Awareness</p> <p>Social Skills Influence Communication Conflict Management Leadership Change Catalyst Building Bonds Collaboration & Cooperation Team Capabilities</p> |

Integration of Integral Theory and Emotional Intelligence

One of the most important aspects of the Emotional Intelligence competencies is that they can be assessed through a growing number of available tests. They can also be taught and developed. If a project manager and his team can learn how to improve their EI, then the profession has a means of ensuring that a balance is achieved between the *soft* and *hard* issues.

Integral Theory indicates that a balance must be maintained between the technical competencies (or right two quadrants) and the personal and team competencies (or left two quadrants) for the most effective and efficient project management and for its continued improvement. The EI competencies provide a means to restore the current imbalance in project management practices.

The integration of the EI competencies on the Integral Theory over-lay is shown in Figure 5.

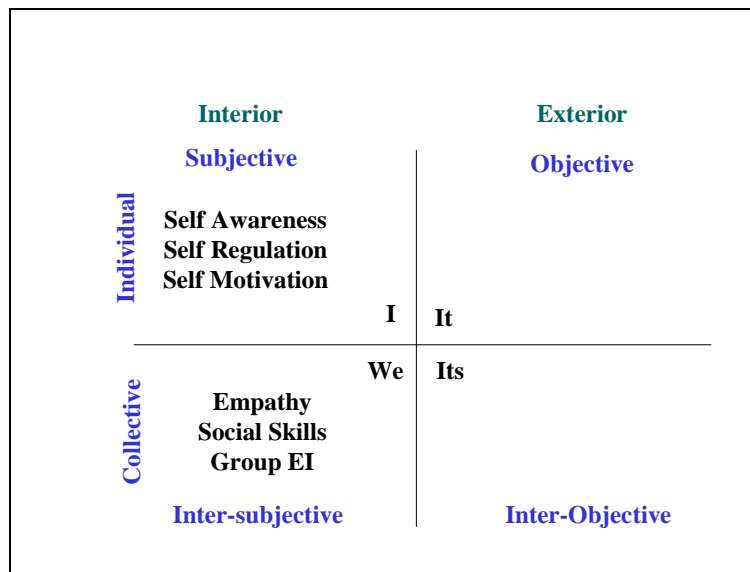


Figure 5 – Integration of Integral Theory and Emotional Intelligence

Application to All Aspects of Project Management

Integral Theory can be applied to all project activities, as each element is in itself a holon; complete in itself but also an important part of the greater whole. One example is the predominantly quantitative approach to Risk Management. It is out of balance if it does not include the subjective human resource elements. From an EI perspective, risk or uncertainty is better assessed from an optimistic viewpoint. In addition, a project team's optimism, motivation, confidence, and relationships with stakeholders also have a significant qualitative impact on team performance in the face of uncertainty that is characteristic of all project environments.

Another example is that Project Management Plans are often developed in the tendering stage and suffer from a lack of participation and ownership by the project manager and project team who will do the work. The technical plans are produced but will often need to be redeveloped, either during the negotiation stage or immediately after contract signature, to ensure that the project manager and project team are able to establish ownership of the project and develop the norms required for effective team development.

Significance to Project Management

Our current practice of project management suffers from an imbalance. This lack of balance can be attributed to our inability to assess and develop competency in the management of the 'soft issues' rather than an over development in the technical competencies.

This balance can be assessed and monitored using an Integral approach and the EI competencies. These approaches and frameworks can also guide the implementation of corrective action. The EI competencies can be used to assess and develop personal and team competency in the project environment.

Should EI competency be included in the project management competency standards?

Through the Integral Institute, there are currently hundreds of leading academics and practitioners around the world reviewing many areas of human endeavour in the light of Integral Theory for its application to medicine, science, business, architecture, organisations, etc. The Integral Institute is encouraging a revolution in thinking and is keen to see many textbooks rewritten from an integral standpoint. Wilber has already written 'Integral Psychology'.

Is Integral Project Management, using the Emotional Intelligence competencies the way of the future? I think so!

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge his son, Christopher, for his expert advice on Integral Theory, his enthusiasm, and his constructive comments in developing this paper.

Notes:

1. Lynn Crawford, 'Profiles of Top Project Managers; the Senior Management Perspective', Australian Project Manager, March 2002, Volume 22 Number 1, page 5
2. Daniel Goleman, 'Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ', Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996
3. Ken Wilber, 'A Brief History of Everything', Ken Wilber, Hill of Content Publishing, 1996, pages 20 to 30.

About the Author

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