

Applying relationship theory to project delivery

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Projects, by their nature, are technical and commercial enterprises. However, what often makes or breaks a project is not a technical issue or even a commercial or cost one - but whether the relationships built can support and drive delivery.

It is easy to overlook the importance of these relationships as projects are driven to deliver quick wins or short-term gains such as “getting a shovel in the ground”. But focusing on these immediate *wants* risks undermining the long-term *needs* for our success, including the trust and collaboration that keeps things moving forward, particularly in modern mega- or even giga-projects where delivery is no longer a simple client/contractor relationship but a web of interconnected delivery partners and organisations.

Relationships between these organisations are what drive your delivery – but they are often not considered or worked upon in any meaningful way. At best, we might begin to think about *interpersonal* relationships, but what about *interorganisational*? After all, each component partner likely has their own ways of working, their own values, and their own ideas of what success looks like.

We see the evidence of this lack of consideration everywhere. How many times have you encountered an organisation – client or otherwise – that is always in a ‘state of emergency’? Where every ask has to be answered *right now*? Perhaps a few times their partners will go along with it (if they have a good relationship), but sooner or later someone will say “no” – and then where does that leave the asker?

Even within a traditional client/contractor relationship, the client may be constantly demanding that their contractor push costs down, or deliver faster, or deliver more, focusing on the client’s immediate ‘wants’ – but if this results in the contractor failing, both sides lose – the client has a failed project, and the contractor may be facing dire consequences, including insolvency.

Further, in complex modern project environments organisations will often be interacting outside of this transactional “I tell, you do” relationship, and so cannot even fall back on the (as mentioned, potentially unsustainable) “well the contract says you have to”.

So, if relationships are that important to project success, what can we do about them?

For interpersonal relationships, Schein & Schein set out a model with four ‘levels’:



Can we also apply these to the relationships between organisations? And what would that look like?

- **Level -1** would consist of an exploitative relationship where one organisation is totally dominant of another, free to use and abuse them without accountability
- At **Level 1**, we would have the traditional transactional relationship – client/contractor, where one party holds all the power, and will only ever be thinking about their own needs – or more likely, their own wants, at any given time.
- **Level 2** places parties in a position of openness – which enables a deeper understanding of other parties’ needs, as well as your own. Because only through understanding the needs of those you are relying upon to deliver, can you fully understand what yours are, and begin to evaluate your wants in terms of those needs.
- **Level 3** would represent a level of intimacy between organisations which is likely unnecessary to most delivery environments. It may have a place in certain places where an acutely high level of trust and dependence is required, but otherwise, it applies far more to our personal relationships than our professional ones. It may even be detrimental, where clients favour one organisation to the exclusion of others, or two partners are co-dependent for any decision-making!

As with interpersonal relationships, Level 2 is the ‘sweet spot’ for delivery. Both parties recognize that

achieving long-term goals means building mutual trust and aligning on shared objectives. Instead of viewing interactions merely as exchanges of services for payments, Level 2 encourages us to see our partners as collaborators whose success is intertwined with our own. This shift from a wants-based approach – built upon a system of ‘knowing your rights’, where contracts and legal obligations dominate – to a needs-based mindset opens the door for genuine problem-solving.

And, if those technical or commercial issues *do* raise their heads – you can proactively resolve or mediate them rather than resorting to costly disputes, where ultimately nobody’s needs will be met!

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