Good Governance, Strong Trust
Building Community Among an Australian City Rebuilding Project

Ninan, Johan; Clegg, Stewart; Mahalingam, Ashwin; Sankaran, Shankar

Important note
To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT INK

Good Governance, Strong Trust: Building Community Among an Australian City Rebuilding Project

By Johan Ninan, Stewart Clegg, Ashwin Mahalingam, and Shankar Sankaran

February 8, 2024   👁 312

In this article, co-authors Johan Ninan, Stewart Clegg, Ashwin Mahalingam, and Shankar Sankaran reflect on their research interests and the inspiration behind their recent article, "Governance Through Trust: Community Engagement in an Australian City Rebuilding Precinct," found in the Project Management Journal.

Complex and megaprojects such as city rebuilding precincts are not isolated entities but rather interconnected with the many stakeholders, including collaborating organizations, project partners, sponsors, experts, contractors, government agencies, and external players such as the project community. Our motivation for this research was the realization that these projects rather than being led by a single organization, require cooperation and coordination among multiple stakeholders and therefore an intricate governance mechanism. From a governance perspective, trust in a project can be considered a form of organizational power as it helps secure consent. Hence, our research objective seeks to understand how trust-building strategies work together to govern project communities, considering governing as a phenomenon constituted by social exchange and organizational power relationships.

A single case study in Australia is considered for the study, with data drawn from diverse sources such as semi-

structured interviews, observation of committee meetings, project documents, news articles along with their comments, and observation of social media exchanges. Online naturalistic data sources such as news articles and social media provide a platform for the project's many stakeholders to be heard. Thus, our research was innovative as we focused on data sources relevant to the field of study and combined traditional interviews and document analysis with modern online naturalistic data sources. Within the single case study, sub-units such as bringing stakeholders together, hospital agenda and social media engagement are discussed to understand the different trust-building strategies within a single case.

The research uncovers three key strategies: resource allocation, legitimacy building, and brand creation. However, these strategies are not mutually exclusive, rather interact with and reinforce each other. Employing resources, building legitimacy, and creating a brand collectively enhance the project's credibility and facilitate meaningful engagement with the community. As trust grows, stakeholders become more invested in the project's success, leading to increased collaboration, open dialogue, and shared responsibility. Trust, therefore, acts as a powerful governance mechanism that underpins effective city-rebuilding projects. Trust building can be strategic and is meant to enable project construction with the least resistance. This strategic use can be considered power in practice, as power is the ability to carry out one's will despite resistance. So, a circuit of power framework can help understand how different trust-building strategies work together to create a perception of the project. Thus, in this research, we highlight how trust can be considered a governance mechanism for the effective engagement of the project community. Thus by understanding and implementing these strategies, project leaders can effectively harness trust as a governance mechanism, leading to more meaningful engagement with the project community.

By employing these strategies in a thoughtful and integrated manner, they can foster meaningful engagement, strengthen relationships, and ensure the project's long-term sustainability. Ultimately, trust paves the way for a shared vision, collaborative decision-making, and the creation of vibrant, thriving communities. We encourage new scholars investigating social science practices to look at online naturalistic data which are important means of communications in the modern 21st century.

Johan Ninan, Stewart Clegg, Ashwin Mahalingam, and Shankar Sankaran

Johan Ninan (pictured) is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Geosciences at Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) in the Netherlands. Ninan is a member of the editorial boards on the International Journal of Project Management (IJPM) and Project Leadership and Society (PLAS). **Stewart Clegg** is a professor in the School of Project Management at the University of Sydney. Clegg was awarded the Edith Penrose Award (INSEAD/EURAM) 2020 for Trail Blazing Research and the best paper award from EURAM 2020 for his article, "Research movements and theorizing dynamics in management and organization studies". **Ashwin Mahalingam** is a faculty member in the Department of Civil Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-M). He is in the building technology and construction management division and is a co-founder of Okapi Advisory Services Pvt. Ltd. **Shankar Sankaran** is a professor of organizational project management at the School of the Built Environment in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney. Sankaran is also an associate member of the Robotics Institute in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology there, and he has research interests in action research, sociotechnical systems, and organizational project management.

View all posts by Johan Ninan, Stewart Clegg, Ashwin Mahalingam, and Shankar Sankaran