

Leading Extreme Projects: Strategy, Risk and Resilience in Practice

By Arroyo, A. and Grisham, T.

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First impressions

Well-written books authored by academics (reflective practitioners who also take an academic intellectual interest in their career work experience) are frequently a sound source of case study insights and reflective wisdom. This book *“Leading Extreme Projects: Strategy, Risk and Resilience in Practice”* (Arroyo and Grisham, 2017) was one that captured my attention when I had an e-mail from the authors telling me that this book, I knew they had been working on for several years, was finally out in print.

The authors are both doctoral graduates of mine from about ten years ago and both completed their Doctor of Project Management degrees from RMIT University while engaged in high-level global executive roles and so I understand their background and what they offer. Before presenting my review of their book, I will provide some background information on these two experts to place their advice and insights into context. All too often I find that books by practice “gurus” are disappointing as there is a risk that such books are self-service, promotional and often in my view shallow. This is definitely not the case for this publication.

Dr Arroyo, from Argentina, has 30+ years’ experience including running his own company Southmark Logistics with branches across South America and worldwide operations. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in Maritime Business (UMM, Buenos Aires, Argentina), Master’s degree in Marine Economics and Operations (WMU, Malmö, Sweden), MBA in Marine Resource Management (AMC, Launceston, Australia) and Doctor of Project Management (RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia). His doctoral thesis (Arroyo, 2009) took an organisational learning and communities of practice perspective of business transformation with participants from mining, petrochemical, heavy industry and transport logistics participants. His thesis provides useful case study analysis and background materials that readers of this book may wish to follow up on (<http://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/view/rmit:7891>).

Dr Grisham, from the USA, has over 44 years of experience on domestic and international business and programs up to US\$3 billion in the power, infrastructure, transportation, education, commercial, communications, manufacturing, business development and dispute resolution sectors. His global project management experience has been gained in 75 countries with expat assignments Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, and part-time in India, Spain and the UK as well as having lived for extended periods in Singapore, India, Spain, and the UK. He currently does corporate training, teaches doctoral students for SMC University in Switzerland and does public speaking engagements on a variety of topics. He has authored four books, and chapters in two others. His doctoral thesis “Cross cultural leadership” (Grisham, 2006) has been downloaded 13,000 times from its RMIT source (<http://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/view/rmit:6200>) and it also provides very useful background information for readers interested in the focus of this book.

Both authors bring to the table a wealth of critical examination and insights into how complex global projects operate in extremely challenging geographical locations as well as



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political and environmental contexts that many readers will never have experienced working in. I have not read many books that are set in such exotic and unusual contexts. Perhaps the most recent pracademic book that discusses very unusual project management situations that is related in its extreme context that comes to mind is “*Managing the Urgent and Unexpected: Twelve Project Cases and a Commentary*” (Wearne and White-Hunt, 2014). However, none of the case studies in that excellent book were set in jungle contexts or took a transportation and site establishment logistics context.

Some readers may ask why they should read about bizarre extreme project contexts when most of their work may be undertaken in a city or urban location in established PM industry settings. That is a valid question I would answer in two ways. First, it is instructive to read about (or better still experience) how uncomfortable challenges in situations out of one’s comfort zone have been well or poorly handled. Learning from outside one’s preferred source of knowledge, insights and disciplines is useful because often similar situations prevail in the more traditional project contexts. The complexities of characteristics that are discussed in this book are present in just about any complex project situation. Second, it is really interesting and thought provoking to read about aspects of project management that we are not very familiar with. In the case of this book, much of the case study material pertains to issues around the logistics, feasibility and uncertainty surrounding the front-end of projects and also the impact on the operational phase of the project after hand-over.

Summarising the contribution made by this book

For me, the contribution that this book makes to my own better understanding of project management in extreme and demanding contexts goes beyond what the authors suggest is their intention in their book. The title suggests “leading and leadership”, “risk” and “resilience” but I feel this book provides more. The project management aspects that I felt better informed about after reading the book include:

Theme	Comments and notes
Stakeholder engagement and management	This book extensively discusses how a range of stakeholders actually had a strong impact on the feasibility (or otherwise) of projects. It illustrates how the case study examples succeeded in (or failed to) adequate engagement with stakeholders and adopting a stakeholder’s perspective through empathy by seeing the project from their point of view. This helps explain how opportunities may be missed or barriers to success are erected. This book has many powerful illustrations and stories to tell through the case study discussions
The impact of national and organisational culture impacts upon projects	This book acknowledges and discusses the impact of national and organisational culture on project delivery. The authors apply critical analysis to their case studies based on seminal cultural theory work of Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede <i>et al.</i> , 2002, 2010) and the GLOBE study work which was undertaken by a large pool of researchers (Chhokar <i>et al.</i> , 2008; Hofstede, 2010;

(continued)

Theme	Comments and notes	
Risk, uncertainty and resilience	House <i>et al.</i> , 2002, 2004; Javidan <i>et al.</i> , 2006). More importantly, their case study discussion illustrates how that cultural impact affects issues that leadership teams and operatives on the ground need to address This set of topics provides a particularly relevant platform for the authors to detail what risks and uncertainties were overlooked and how that had an adverse impact on the case study illustrations. Their case study examples and discussion also provided them with the chance to discuss opportunity through risk as well as how resilient many local participants may be when their expertise and value is recognised	847
Ethics and banditry	The authors illustrate how triple bottom line and corporate responsibility have a real impact of projects in extreme contexts. As they point out with their case studies, the project owners and instigators may have had recognised obligations from their home base regulatory authorities (and even a large body of shareholders) but frequently what happened on the ground did not match expectations or espoused values. The authors discuss consequences of poor ethical action. The insights into what can best be termed “banditry”, particularly by opportunistic local project participant in the jungles and river systems of Latin America, is both enlightening and cautionary. These are the stories that are often NOT provided in project management books and papers	
Ethics and leadership	I repeat “ethics” in this summary because the book both discusses the “dark” side of dealing with corruption and a pragmatic perspective on how leading with a strong cultural appreciation of the local context presents ethical dilemmas. This part of the book’s context provides, in my opinion, valuable insights and cause for reflection. The message about leadership in this book is that these extreme environments demand a particular set of people skills and abilities for perspective taking, open mindedness and authenticity to build trust, respect and commitment from others	

I suspect that different readers will gain different insights from the book based on their own experience, theoretical and practice knowledge as well as their attitude to what “real” project management is about. In a seminal piece of work on “rethinking project management”, a group of highly respected academics from mainly Europe but also several from North America (Maylor, 2006; Winter and Smith, 2006; Winter *et al.*, 2006) expanded the boundaries of project management studies and suggested how it should be followed and explored. Part of that call was that the study of project management practice and reflective practice was an important avenue for expanding our understanding of project management and how projects should be

organised. That “rethinking project management” report was reprised and commented upon ten years later in a special issue in the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* (Walker, 2016) and the papers in that issue indicate that there is still a great deal of contribution to both project management theory and practice to be made by reflective practitioners who can provide deep and meaningful insights into how practice may be improved and how we may learn from mistakes. This book makes a strong contribution in that regard.

The book structure and content

The book comprises nine chapters with the final chapter being a short summary of suggestions for practice.

Chapter 1 introduces the book with a chapter that explains how extreme conditions challenge traditional project management approaches in the oil and gas sector. This chapter illuminates insights and points made through a case study drawn from the Bolivian jungles and introduces the concept of the collaborative project enterprise in which participants may work together for mutual benefit. This ideal sets the benchmark against which the authors are able to discuss shortcomings in project outcome resulting from lack of collaboration and/or opportunistic behaviours or varying levels of incompetence. There was some interesting discussion in this chapter about river logistics and complexities and realities associated with that part of the case study project in a jungle setting. The chapter content is also useful to those interested in stakeholder engagement issues, especially with respect to interactions with indigenous and local people affected by the environmental impact of projects and the influence that world opinion on human rights may have on the perception of major project partners’ brand image. It stresses the need for project management teams to have strong cultural appreciation at the global level and to also possess diplomatic skills.

Chapter 2 continues the stakeholder focus within a global context for remote complex projects with three case studies being discussed, one in Central America, South America and the Canadian Arctic. This chapter also draws upon political and communication issues and dangers of corporate complacency where head office staff, dealing with government bureaucracy, can miss important local on-the-ground and regional issues that need to be carefully monitored and considered. The Canadian case study was in part about business transformation and widening of entrepreneurial opportunities for skilled remotely based communities. In this case, they may take advantage of global warming as an opportunity for opening up the North West Passage to shipping and associated commercial activities.

In Chapter 3, three more case studies anchor discussion on the feasibility stage of many complex remote projects being poorly understood with respect to the real availability of local and existing logistic resources. While the case studies may focus on port facilities and the like, we can imagine how this more broadly applies to assumptions about resource availability on other types of projects both remote and in urban centres. It draws our attention to assumptions made about the quality and quantity of necessary foundational resources for a project and how bottlenecks and barriers may be overlooked.

Chapter 4 has its focus on the front-end feasibility process. Two case studies illustrate the extent that a significant enabling infrastructure is needed to be provided on remote projects in highly underdeveloped regions to allow the project to be delivered. This may totally alter its feasibility, especially for mining etc. where commodity prices fluctuate widely in both short- and long-term cycles. I could see this chapter having insights about transformational projects in other sectors, IT in an urban setting for example, where radical technology disruptions may make it necessary to fully revisit assumptions about legacy assets that are assumed to be available to deliver a project and to operate the facility.

Chapter 5 focuses on two case studies. The first is located in North West Argentina where the most viable entry point for logistics and transport passed through Chile and so this led to potential complications of customs, permits and other administrative factors that

have a real impact on the passage of goods from adjacent countries that needed to be planned for and built into the project feasibility study and delivery plan. The second case study related to a project to improve transport and transit of goods from Europe to the West coast of South America offering an alternative via land and river. This required the project leaders to deal with a range of stakeholder participants with cultural backgrounds ranging from the USA, Argentina, Brazil, Israel, Spain, French and Germany. This chapter draws up the cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede and through the GLOBE study of leadership. Each cultural dimension is discussed for its applicability and relevance to the case study.

Chapter 6 had a focus on operational sustainability through two case studies in the shipping logistics sector. It draws out considerations about collaboration and knowledge sharing and the hidden but real value of local knowledge and industry-specific knowledge required of any business re-engineering or transformation project.

Chapter 7 has two case studies, one a gold mining project in Indonesia and the other in Papua New Guinea. This is another excellent chapter for readers who are interested in stakeholder management aspects. It also draws in interesting insights about human cross-cultural communications. The second case study is about the way that technology, leadership and operations knowledge can deliver innovation. It also highlights risk and uncertainty management.

Chapter 8 details two African case studies one set in Madagascar and the second in Cameroon. The Madagascar case study highlights how detailed survey and planning of the project context is vital to ensure that a workable project business case and plan can be developed. Both chapters also draw in insights about the way that some Engineering Procurement Construction Maintenance (EPMC) organisations can manipulate a project owner's lack of detail knowledge of project delivery to ensure that risk impacts are shifted to the owner even when poor assumptions were made at the project planning and initial development stage by the EPMC entity. The chapter also has interesting insights about conflict management and taking the long-view of project sustainability when undertaking projects in Africa. The chapter also illustrates the huge opportunities present in Africa and how the up-front infrastructure and logistics components of project delivery are so important a consideration.

Chapter 9 offers suggestion for practice. These 11 pages contain valuable summative insights presented throughout the book.

To conclude

Each reader of this book will take away a different set of insights depending on their own prior knowledge and experience. It is tempting when perusing a book cover contents such as for this book to make quick judgements such as “oh this is mainly about logistics” or “oh, this is about remote projects”. However, many of our most interesting and useful lessons to be learned come from outside our comfort zone. If we have a general construction, IT or health services background, we may not look to others using project management to deliver benefits and that can be a lost opportunity to gain fresh insights and reflection.

For me, this book had some very interesting insights into logistics and working on projects in remote global contexts that I found fascinating. I also learned more about global cultural issues relating to leadership as well as a lot more about stakeholder engagement and ethical dimensions of leadership in delivering projects. The case studies are a gold mine of insights and content that I could use in teaching and I am sure that practitioners will also find these case studies a well-written and relevant resource.

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