

What do project management practitioners think governance is? A study on perceptions in Queensland, Australia

Abstract

Purpose: To determine if there is confusion in governance terminology amongst experienced management and project management practitioners.

Design/ methodology/ approach: Practitioner interviews and subsequent analysis.

Findings: Significant differences in governance terminology were found. The participants had nevertheless arrived at similar operating arrangements for their committees, even though they came from different segments of different industries and did not agree on the definition of governance. It was possible to develop a list of working parameters for operation of these committees from their responses. The labelling of committees associated with governance as steering or decision-making was found to be problematic and various causes/ motivations for the differing definitions of governance having arisen were detected. These ranged from altruism, through dogmatic belief in particular frameworks, to enhancing career prospects/ ego.

Research Implications: The sample came from organisations and industries in one state in one country. The need for review of governance terminology used in various project management practitioner reference documents and methodologies was identified.

Practical Implications: Projects and business alike can potentially achieve improvements in efficiency and effectiveness through consistency of terminology and the clarity this brings to governance arrangements and committee operations.

Social Implications: Creation of a unifying feature within the project and management literature, shifting the understanding of governance and its boundaries and limitations. This will help progress governance from complexity to simplicity, from an art to an understandable practice, from a concept that has been hijacked for partisan and political purposes to a lean social tool which can be put to use for the benefit of organisations, whether public, charitable or private.

Originality/ value: The value is clarity – resulting in the avoidance of confusion and misunderstanding together with their consequent waste of time, resources and money.

Introduction

“Transparent, effective, accountable governance is critical to ensuring that development benefits people and the planet” according to the World Resources Institute (2018). However confusion exists within the academic community over the definition of governance and related terms. This was chronicled by McGrath and Whitty (2013) and McGrath and Whitty (2015) who found documented evidence of this in (Ahola et al., 2014, Biesenthal and Wilden, 2014, Pitsis et al., 2014, Cepiku, 2013). Their analysis identified further confusion between governance and corporate governance arising from assumption of the joint-stock company organisational model. They also pointed out that governance itself does not require accountability and used the term organisational governance to accommodate it. They noted “a range of subjects (leadership, decision making, rationalising, relationships, coordinating) that various authors have attempted to range under the banner of governance” along with accountability framework, organisational structures and processes (McGrath and Whitty, 2013). One paper had even viewed it as “administration, coordinating, appraising, planning” (Sohal and Fitzpatrick, 2002). McGrath and Whitty (2015) were also careful to distinguish between governance and strategy and none of their definitions of governance terms used that latter term. However, they did not investigate practitioner reference documents or practitioner views to see if there was empirical evidence of confusion existing in the practitioner community.

This indicates that confusion over the definition of governance has been established in the academic literature, which leads into asking the question as to whether practitioners are similarly confused. A research question can therefore be formally stated as: Is there confusion about governance terminology amongst project management practitioners?

A literature review is first conducted to provide current context and to see if other reviews of practitioner views on this subject have been conducted. The research is then designed, selecting the instrument, designing the questions and selecting the sample. An evaluation method is then determined. The interviews were conducted, and the results are reported and discussed before developing a typology of motivations to reconcile the contradictory findings.

Literature review

We will first briefly examine a recent work on governance to establish context. A book on project governance edited by Muller (2017a) with chapters by 11 authors has recently been published and provides an overview of governance as related to project management. It is concerned with implementing governance in accordance with the Millstein (1998) principles of good governance - transparency, accountability, responsibility and fairness (Muller, 2017b). The book discusses governance models, positioning, orientations, paradigms, principles and theories but does not address the issue of its definition. It does however note diversity in terminology around governance in saying “whenever we talk about governance we must first clarify the perspective we are taking towards the governed object” (Muller, 2017b).

We note from our review of the McGrath and Whitty (2015) sources, that many authors did not recognise their own confusion. To locate any other investigations of practitioner views on governance, we conducted a literature review which is systematic or structured in the sense that search conditions are pre-determined and then implemented. However, because this review is simply attempting to identify confusion that authors may be unaware of themselves, the pre-determined targeted searches will not return results that a conventional systematic

review of a field normally would i.e. a long list of references comprehensively covering the field of governance. To do so would be futile and detract from identifying confusion; it would result in being distracted by reviewing large volumes of literature where the authors are unaware of confusion existing and so would detract from our research. We are specifically targeting and researching terminology confusion and that alone. A further factor supporting this approach is that the subject sounds important and can affect career progression so much that it can be most un-wise to admit to any uncertainty or confusion about it. This means that so the subject is best dealt with in an independent academic research environment. A further consideration is that in researching confusion, it is not necessary to locate everything that has ever been written on a subject; it is only necessary to find some confusion that actually exists. If confusion is found, then it is irrelevant however many other people may have written about it and not recognised this.

We decided to use the EBSCO database as it is an aggregator which searches multiple databases from various sources. We developed three sets of search terms; one to identify any practitioner investigations for governance specifically, one to identify any papers dealing with management terms more generally and one to identify instances of confusion in governance terminology. These searches were designed to cover the search space. They and any specific reasoning behind them are detailed below.

Any investigation of practitioner views would have to have the terms governance and practitioner in their title as such a task could not be done to an acceptable academic standard as an incidental part of some other study. A search of all EBSCO databases was therefore conducted on 3/11/2017 for 'governance' and 'practitioner' in the title. It found 86 items of which 41 were non-duplicates. All were examined but only three were relevant. Lunt and Fouché (2010) working in the field of social work said "There is growing interest in the contribution of practitioner research towards bodies of knowledge and practice change." Murungi and Pena (2017) conducted a core/periphery analysis of practitioner and academic perceptions and noted "a possible disconnect between academic knowledge and how IT practitioners actually work." Lambert (2006) noted that Social science had not been very effective in improving practice and that "Part of the failing is due to the near-exclusion of practitioners from research design and implementation and of practitioner perspective from problem definition and conclusion formulation and presentation (form and language)." These references all support our endeavours to seek the views of practitioners but revealed no investigation of practitioner views on governance. Their calls support the views of Walker et al. (2008) on the need for collaborative academic/ practitioner research, colloquially referred to as 'pracademics' when the researcher is also an experienced practitioner.

We next searched all EBSCO databases on 3/11/2017 for "management term" and 'confusion' in any field. This found only one item. It was by Kang (2015), who in discussing human performance technology (HPT) commented "People use the same terms and concepts and unconsciously think that other people's understanding of the term or concept is the same as theirs". They noted that there was no universally accepted definition of change management and proposed "new terms- macro change management and micro change management-for the two uses of the term change management" (Kang, 2015). We note this solution added a qualifier to gain the necessary precision.

We then looked for instances of governance confusion by searching all EBSCO databases on 3/11/2017 for 'governance' and 'confusion' in abstracts and found 166 items of which only 59 were non-duplicates. All abstracts were examined and there were only five where the two terms were related to each other and to definition. These were Romero (2012), Farazmand

(2013), Barbazza and Tello (2014), McGrath and Whitty (2015), Hasselman (2017). They are considered below in chronological order.

Romero (2012) reported 4 different definitions of IT governance and noted "These varying definitions open the door to numerous, mixed, and disparate views on the subject and, subsequently, how it is applied and practiced" (Romero, 2012). He did not analyse them or attempt to reconcile them but did state "IT governance actually is a function of the business and should have been called *business governance of IT or enterprise governance of IT*" (Romero, 2012).

Farazmand (2013) said "confusion reigns with different viewpoints, especially when there is no consensus as to what for example governance and administration means or should be". He offered the term 'sound governance' as an alternative to the term 'good governance' (Farazmand, 2013). He noted that "replacing or substituting governance for public administration has become a fashionable trend in academic as well as practitioner circles worldwide" (Farazmand, 2013). He also noted scholars and supra-governmental institutional organizations having followed the concept 'governance' to the point that "it became a buzzword subject of the national and international conferences, seminars, and workshops, as well as a key word for grant writers seeking research and conference funding for papers, seminars, reports, and books" and that conferences organized by UN and affluent governments, often sponsored by global corporations, promoted this notion cognitively and disseminated it worldwide (Farazmand, 2013).

He further noted that "... 'good governance' ... became one of the most pressing requirements on third world countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin/Central America as a condition for international assistance (Amsden 2007; Hamilton 1989)" (Farazmand, 2013), and that the former president of Tanzania, Julius K. Nyerere, in delivering the keynote address at the UN Conference on Governance in Africa in 1998, severely criticized the notion of 'good governance' as an imperialistic and colonizing concept (Farazmand, 2013). It is interesting that consideration of the subject from multiple normative perspectives by Farazmand (2013) also noted that "The second problem with "good governance" is its heavily loaded normative values – what is good and what is bad and for whom? - as defined by global power elites (Hardt and Negri 2000; Hauffman 2006; Parenti 2010)" (Farazmand, 2013). He said "Governing refers to the function of governance by whatever actors or authorities or institutions, including nongovernmental ones, whereas governance consists of process, structure, value, management, policy, and administration" (Farazmand, 2013). He asserted that "Public management, administration, and governance are not neutral concepts; they embody 'normative values' " (Farazmand, 2013). These deal with exercising and influencing power; how the system is driven, rather than what the governance system is. He also stated "should we not use the prefixes of 'public' or 'private' governance—we should" (Farazmand, 2013). This corresponds with McGrath and Whitty (2015) saying "the term public governance has deliberately not been included in the terms defined above as it is an unnecessary product of the confusion resulting from failing to distinguish between the terms governance and corporate governance".

Barbazza and Tello (2014) presented a table of governance definitions from 19 sources including international bodies and found a wide range of inclusions. These were classified into dimensions that included fundamental values and sub-functions. Many of these were normative, such as democracy, ethics, integrity, partnerships, participation, consensus and formulating strategic direction. They did not propose either a definition of governance or a definitional method.

McGrath and Whitty (2015) reviewed previous governance literature and identified definitional confusion. They developed a method for refining definitions of groups of related terms and applied it to a range of governance terms, producing the following definitions:

- Govern = direct and control.
- Governance = the system by which an entity is directed and controlled.
- Government = an entity that controls a geographic area.
- Organisational governance = the system by which an organisation is directed, controlled and held to account.
- Organisational governance arrangements = an entity's structure (component parts, inter-relationships), positions (roles, responsibilities, pay levels and numbers), rules (written and unwritten, including policies, procedures, codes, methodologies and conventions), decision making processes (including financial and other delegations, as well as approval processes) and reporting arrangements (annual, financial, progress, assurance, regulatory, stakeholder).
- Corporate governance = the organisational governance of a corporation = the system by which a corporation is directed and controlled and held to account.
- Project governance = the organisational governance of a project = the system by which a project is directed and controlled and held to account (McGrath and Whitty, 2015).

These definitions relegated many of the terms commonly associated with governance to organisational governance arrangements. They explicitly excluded ethics and strategy, as these can be normatively contested.

Hasselman (2017) noted "Adaptive management is now an accepted quality of governance and, in some cases, a legislative requirement of natural resource management. The concept is widely encouraged; yet, there remain high rates of implementation failure" (Hasselman, 2017). Hasselman (2017) also noted "Confusion on the definition of adaptive management is one cause of implementation errors, with researchers, natural resource managers and policy-makers talking and acting cross-purposes". She analysed the definitions of adaptive management, adaptive co-management and adaptive governance, highlighting confusion within definitions, between definitions and misinterpretations of definitions, noting that interchangeable use of these terms suggested a lack of additionality. She also noted "The relationship of adaptive governance to governance is also questionable, with adaptive governance defined variously as a mode of governance and as a quality of good governance" (Hasselman, 2017).

A further paper dealing with the association of project governance with steering committees and project boards was also located. It was by McGrath and Whitty (2013) and drew the distinction between whether a committee advises or decides and the difficulties that not discerning this difference can cause. This association has existed for some time, as indicated by its presence in the PRINCE2 governance model where "the steering group is equivalent to PRINCE2's Project Board" (Murray, 2009) Section 19.10. The association of steering committees with governance is still current, as evidenced by Muller (2017b) saying "Project governance... is typically executed by a steering group, which directs and controls the project manager". Muller (2017c) also notes "The steering group is the most widely used governance institution. Ninety-seven percent of project managers indicated that they report to a steering group". A further paper surveying practitioners on the subject of steering committees by McGrath and Whitty (2019) has also come to our attention. It identifies six

separate confusions concerning steering committees and confirms the model developed by McGrath and Whitty (2013).

Other sources have noted the difficulty of definitions generally. Crawford et al. (2007) noted "It is easy to assume that within a field such as project management, where profession-specific terminology is common, that different people attach the same meaning to a particular word. However, this is not necessarily the case". This expresses a view similar to Kang (2015) above, supporting careful consideration of definitional matters.

Ozkan (2015) also documented resolution of terminology confusion in the business process domain using a consolidated class diagram to describe the structure of a system of terms by showing the system's classes, attributes, operations and relationships. This produced "a comprehensive list of the related concepts all together in one picture and their links to each other from a single and consistent point of view." (Ozkan, 2015).

This literature review has therefore confirmed that confusion in governance terminology exists in the academic literature. It has also found no prior investigation of practitioner views on governance and no assessment of the impact this confusion has had on practice. We can therefore proceed with investigating our research question.

The literature review also found one view that the governance term has become a fashionable word in academic and practitioner circles, loaded with normative values as its usage by organisations and grant writers has expanded, over-running other terms. We will therefore consider the effect of values when interpreting the results of the practitioner interviews.

Research Design

Our ontological position is that confusion in governance terminology exists. To investigate this, we adopt the epistemology of constructionism, as governance is a social construct, influenced by organisational cultural environment. Our theoretical perspective is interpretivism as the meaning of governance depends on the consciousness of people using the term. The research question calls for use of a qualitative method of data collection. Consequently our methodology is discourse analysis and our research method is the interview.

Use of quantitative methods would tempt drawing conclusions by induction based upon a value judgement on confidence limits. Adopting a qualitative method enables application of the scientific method of deduction or disproving, to enable definitive statements to be made about what can be falsified. This enables a narrowing of the field of truth, rather than producing confidence limits on hypotheses or speculations. Language is a system of communication that works through agreement, rather than a physical system constrained to obey laws of nature. We, of course, set out to use a sample large enough to identify the majority of issues and this is further elaborated in the following sections.

Instrument selection

Conducting a survey was not considered appropriate as this would not facilitate exploring issues in depth relative to the particular circumstances of individual participants (Wengraf, 2001). Fontana and Prokos (2007) considered "Face-to-face interviews have many advantages over less interactive methods. As Shuy (2002) notes, many situations benefit from face-to-face interviews, including those in which the interview is long, or includes complicated topics or sensitive questions". Governance is a complex subject and face-to-face

interviewing was considered an appropriate means of canvassing it while avoiding positivist oversight.

We nevertheless sought to structure the interviews so they did not become undirected conversations leading nowhere. Fontana and Prokos (2007) noted that in structured interviewing, "all respondents receive the same set of questions asked in the same order" and "The interviewers must perfect a style of "interested listening" that rewards the respondent's participation but does not evaluate these responses (Converse and Schuman 1974)" (Fontana and Prokos, 2007). This was appropriate for our particular research question, and suggested use of a semi-structured interview which Wengraf (2001) noted as appropriate for depth interviewing. Fontana and Prokos (2007), Barriball and While (1994) also noted "semi-structured interviews are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers".

Wengraf (2001) noted "Semi-structured interviewing is characterized by an emphasis on relatively open questions. However, you may wish also to put certain closed questions". Fontana and Prokos (2007) said "the structured interview ... often elicits rational responses, but it overlooks or inadequately assesses the emotional dimension" (Fontana and Prokos, 2007). While conducting this study we have observed that governance is a subject that can induce strong emotions, and Whitty (2010) also noted the influences of emotions in project management behaviour. We therefore wished to capture the emotional dimension of governance. We therefore decided to use semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a combination of open and closed questions, some of which would directly call for an emotional response.

Question design

Question design was based on the categories of questions used in a management study by Kummerow and Kirby (2013). These categories were evaluation, personal experience and context, and they were a mixture of open and closed. The questions used in this study were tailor-made for the research question and based on the Kummerow and Kirby (2013) protocol. However, their investigation was concerned with behaviour rather than concepts, occurred within a contained organisational boundary and was more amenable to statistical analysis than the research question posed here.

For this particular research question, it was appropriate for the majority of interview questions to be open, with closed questions being used principally as prompts.

The interview strategy was to first confirm the background and context of the person by determining various classificatory factors, then ask the pre-determined interview questions. The background and context factors were:

- the sector of their organisation (Public or Private enterprise (G=Government, P = Private, H = Hybrid)),
- the area within the Sector (SG = State Government, LG = Local Government, SGA = State Government Authority, M = Manufacturing, E = Education),
- the person's work type = The type of products worked with (I = Infrastructure (Civil/ Building/Electrical/Mechanical), IT = Information Technology, including IT infrastructure, BD = Business Development).

Semi-structured interview questions were then developed to capture as many perspectives of governance as possible. The approach was to ask evaluation questions on the words used and

then explore personal associations with the term. The initial evaluation questions therefore addressed the words used in governance, with Q1 exploring definitional words used, Q2 exploring associations with the term and Q3 exploring one particularly common association. A question on personal experiences then followed to elicit feelings towards governance (Q4).

A combination of open-ended and closed questions was developed as follows:

- Q1. What words would you use to describe or define governance?
- Q2. Are there any things or terms you equate or associate with governance?
- Q3. Do you associate steering committees with good governance? (Y/N/M)
- Q4. What feelings does use of the term evoke for you?

The open-ended questions (Q1, Q2 and Q4) were intended to range across the field and encourage participants to present anecdotes, observations and opinions. The single pre-determined closed question (Q3) was prompted by work on committees by McGrath and Whitty (2013). This question actually had no 'right' answer and although the question was a closed one, it was designed to flush out issues behind whatever strong opinion was expressed.

Other closed questions were asked by way of 'impromptu' prompts to either stimulate further observations or to clarify meaning when the response was not clear. In the latter cases a summary or interpretation of the view expressed was related back to the participant for confirmation or correction.

The interviews were expected to take between 60 and 120 minutes. All interviews were conducted within that time frame, with most taking 60 to 90 minutes.

Sample selection

As noted above, a qualitative deductive approach was adopted. Using a deductive approach, only one dissenting view is sufficient to demonstrate contention exists while, of course, even full agreement from the sample would not still not prove that no contention existed. This renders statistical analysis inappropriate and so it was not necessary to have a statistically significant minimum sample size for the purpose of gaining inductive confidence.

Only people who were both knowledgeable on the topic and held organisational positions where they would be required to implement their knowledge were interviewed. This avoided assessing issues of training and experience. This also conforms with consensus theory which is based on the principle that experts tend to agree more with each other within their particular domain than do novices, according to (Romney et al., 1986) who also indicated stable results with sample sizes of around six 'experts'. We decided to select only people who were all at least a program manager or head of a project management support office. More recently, Guest et al. (2006) have indicated a sample size of six to 12 is sufficient where the participants share common experiences, participants are interviewed separately and in private and the questions asked comprise a common domain of knowledge and a similar set of questions is asked of all participants. On this basis, given that we were interested in differences between engineering infrastructure and IT and given the literature review found previous interviews of IT practitioner but none of engineering infrastructure practitioners, we set out to interview at least 12 with an engineering infrastructure project background plus at least six from an IT background.

The likelihood of detecting disagreement was increased by selecting the interview sample across the boundaries of discipline and organisation type. A range of these were selected; from government and private enterprise, from physical infrastructure and IT, and from consulting and project owner organisations.

Consideration was given to whether participants would be selected locally in Queensland, Australia or from interstate or overseas. Australia sits at cultural and geographic crossroads between England/ Europe, the Americas and Asia. Local members of The Australian Institute of Project Management are heavily involved with the International Project Management Association (IPMA) and local practitioners were involved in development of the first PMBOK. The Project Management Institute (PMI) also has a strong local presence. This, together with the ease of global communication, global access to databases and the existence of internationally accepted bodies of knowledge should ensure that world-wide trends influence local participants. It was therefore considered that the sample could be selected locally. The research question was also framed deductively rather than inductively to avoid sample size and location effects. We also note the findings of Guest et al. (2006) that when sampling within a targeted specific group, adding results from another country identifies few additional factors.

Potential organisations and candidates were approached, 21 experienced managers and project managers agreed to participate, and all were interviewed, exceeding the requirement for theoretical saturation. The participants all had between 20 and 45 years of working experience. Several headed large infrastructure delivery organisations.

Evaluation method

The responses of participants were recorded, transcribed and then compared on a question by question basis. The evaluation of the research question is straightforward from the perspective that if everyone interviewed indicates the same understanding of governance, then confusion is not established and there is then no contest or disagreement identified among practitioners requiring resolution. However, if this is not the case, then disagreement over terminology can be considered established and we will then examine participant statements for themes/ clues as to possible causes/ motivations for these differences having developed.

Data collection and taxonomy of the group of participants

Interviews were conducted between 13 August 2014 and 3 September 2015.

21 people were interviewed from 7 organisations of which 4 were in the private sector (2 separate consultancies, 1 multi-national manufacturing company and 1 educational institution) 2 from the Government sector (a state government department and a local government department) and 1 which straddles both – a commercialised state government authority. All had offices in Queensland, Australia. The interviews averaged 90 minutes duration, with the shortest taking 45 minutes and the longest two hours.

The distribution by industry area was 4 from private industry (1 from each company), 16 from government (7 from state (1 of whom was a contracted consultant) and 9 from local (1 of whom was a contracted consultant)) and 1 was from the hybrid organisation (who was also a contracted consultant).

The distribution of work types engaged in was 9 in physical civil infrastructure, 6 in IT, 1 in business development, 1 in manufacturing, 1 in academia/ buildings, and 3 in multiple work types (2 in infrastructure and business development, 1 in physical infrastructure and IT).

The full taxonomy of the interviewed group is given in Table 1 which shows the participants (1 to 21), their organisation (A to G), industry sector, area within that sector, and their work type or discipline.

Table 1
Participant Taxonomy

#	Org	Sector	Area	Work type
1	A	P	M	I
2	G	P	E	I
3	C	G	LG	BD
4	C	G	LG	IT
5	D	H	SGA&C	IT&I
6	C	G	LG	I
7	C	G	LG	I
8	B	G	SG	I
9	B	G	SG	I
10	C	G	LG	IT
11	B	G	SG	I
12	C	G	LG	I
13	C	G	LG	IT
14	B	G&P	SG&C	IT
15	B	G	SG	I
16	C	G	LG	I
17	C	G&P	LG&C	IT
18	B	G	SG	IT
19	E	P	C	I
20	B	G	SG	I&BD
21	F	P	C	I&BD

Legend:

G=Government	SG=State Government	I=Infrastructure (Civil/ Building /Electrical/ Mechanical)
P=Private	SGA=State Government Authority	IT=Information Technology, including IT infrastructure
H=Hybrid	LG=Local Government	BD=Business Development
	C=Consultant	
	M=Manufacturing	
	E=Education	

In the following sections, participants are referred to by their number and organisation e.g. 1A or 21F. The abbreviations in the Table 1 legend are also used in places where brevity is advantageous.

Note that full transcripts of interviews have not been included in this paper due to word limit restraints.

Results

The results of the analysis of participant responses to the four questions are presented below.

Q1: Governance description

The question asked was "What words would you use to describe or define governance?"

The words used to describe governance were as follows: oversight, process, directed, control, decision making, structure, approvals, way finding, management of risk, systems, gates, order, support, quality, framework and Quality Assurance (QA).

Control was the most frequently used word and was mentioned explicitly by nine participants, closely followed by decision making which was mentioned by eight. Seven mentioned responsibility and structure, framework and oversight were all mentioned by five. Roles were mentioned by four, approvals and accountability each by three, direction, risk and quality/ QA each by two and support and way finding by one each.

One participant was fulsome about the definition of governance (in his response to Question 6), saying:

This thing's as long as a piece of string! You could add anything in there and call it governance if you wanted. I don't know where that story starts and ends. All I know is it's a part of a good functioning organisation to have it and I hope you can find the answer to it. I've never adequately sat down to distil it all. I think you'd get spaghetti. I had one go at that about 10 years ago and gave up. (3C).

While none of the words being used were incompatible with each other, they did indicate the ambit of the term and their range indicates there was no agreed definition. The research question can therefore be answered affirmatively; experienced management and project management practitioners are confused in their usage of governance terminology.

Q2: – Governance association

The question asked was "Are there any things or terms you equate or associate with governance?"

This yielded a wider range of terms than Question 1 did. These are listed below and were analysed by comparing word for word all the terms used against the reference definition. Matches are shown in bold typeface.

The terms used were as follows: police role, oversight, gate process/ **system, govern, control, rules**, regulations, **policies**, legislation, **processes**, methods, **procedures, organisational structure**, standards, checks and balances, **delegations**, audit, review, ethical standards, legal frameworks, risk management, business continuity, ownership, **accountability, responsibility**, 'pain in the arse', **roles and responsibilities**, committees or program boards, strategic plans, steering committees, Project Control Groups (PCGs), charters, Terms of Reference (TORs), rigour, **direction**, business case, **reporting arrangements, decision making, assurance**, support to deliver, framework, authority, giving leadership and adherence to process.

Q3: – Governance and Steering Committees

The question asked was "Do you associate steering committees with good governance?"

9 said yes, 6 said no, 5 said maybe and 1 was not asked. However, of the 9 who said yes, 4 were unreserved (2G, 9B, 10C, 20B) and all were referring to steering committees that

worked effectively. The remaining 5 gave 'yes if' type responses, one of whom (7C) said "Yes if they have appropriate authority to do something. It's not governance if they don't decide". One who said maybe (4C) said "Steering committees can be valuable, depending on how they are run". One who answered no said "they should be but they don't here" (13C) and one who said no (17C) said "I associate them with governance but not necessarily with good governance".

The responses indicate that there is not universal agreement that the existence of a steering committee equates with good governance. However, the insights contained in their observations were instructive. It appeared that most participants had experimented with the concept and by trial and error over many years had arrived at some realisations that had commonalities. It is evidently possible to sense things without necessarily being able to put that sense into words, as evidenced by participant responses.

Whether the response to the question was yes or no, most seemed to accept that the mere existence of something called a steering committee does not equate with good governance, but if it is constituted well and functions effectively, it can be a useful governance tool.

Much of the contention and apparent disagreement in the responses involved whether the committee should or does make decisions or not. This issue was directly addressed by several; "They decide some things and endorse others to go up the line" (20B), "some are information sharing rather than direction giving" (15B) and "levels of governance from a board type level down to PCGs because you have different levels of control and decision-making responsibility" (6C). In other words, there will be or needs to be a Terms of Reference (TOR) that makes clear what matters the committee can decide and which it must refer upwards. Many explicitly mentioned TORs (6C, 7C, 14B, 16C, 21F). One pointed out that their organisation's highest-level project committee was purely advisory (6C).

This issue of what 'steering committee' means was investigated by McGrath and Whitty (2013) who researched its origin and found the term had been appropriated by IT in the 1980s to influence organisational power, and the label 'steering' was used, despite cautions in the literature, regardless of whether the committee was actually steering or not. This had the effect of imposing a democratic device into authoritarian organisations. So use of the phrase 'steering committee' as a generic term has been and still is a misnomer and the importance of deciding versus advising, first raised in Drury (1984) remains unacknowledged and untested in the subsequent literature (McGrath and Whitty, 2013).

The interview responses here indicated that labelling of Steering Committees is still an issue indicating that the misnomer still persists more than 30 years later.

The reference by 14B to PRINCE2 labelling such a committee as a board rather than steering committee is at first surprising, given the IT origin of the term (as traced by McGrath and Whitty (2013)), until one realises that a board sounds much more important than a steering committee, so the attempt to influence organisational power appears to have continued and just evolved.

It is evident that to untangle confusion around this we need to be very specific about who is deciding what and which set of decisions are actually being referred to. A person who is a decision maker in some organisational circumstances may have no decision-making authority on the particular committee being discussed.

Frustrations with steering committee governance was perhaps best and most humorously expressed by 21F who chronicled attempts to hijack steering committees into delaying projects as follows:

Invariably, when someone says: ‘I want to have a steering committee’, I think of a steering wheel with multiple hands on it. Everybody wants to be on a steering committee because there’s no responsibility on a steering committee. Anybody can get on there and interfere and stop things from happening ... Steering committees drive me nuts. They generally should be a consultative group sitting off to one side for the people who actually have to deliver something. I’m dealing with one right now... saying ‘Oh no, we want to review that’. I responded saying that you commissioned us to kick that ball into that goal by that time, we’ve given you the timeframes that you need to make decisions by and you now don’t have time to do additional layers of consulting on this. That’s what we signed up for, that’s what you signed up to... I had a fellow the other day on one steering committee who said ‘I want to apply Gateway thinking to this’. The only reason he wanted to put a gateway on it was that it gave him a chance to slow things down. Steering committees to me are just a way people hide. If you are on the project team or a PCG or the project manager, you’ve got nowhere to hide. You’ve got a scope; you’ve got to deliver it; end of story.

Another said “They are used as talk fests on details rather than for making decisions based on outcomes” (17C). One noted the potential complexity of governance arrangements saying “There is a balance to be achieved. You can go crazy and over complicate” (10C), and another said “(Instances of) poor (governance) have generally been associated with vast levels of bureaucracy – (with people) scared of what decisions will mean to those above them” (19E).

The responses to this question indicated that although the definitions of governance given were quite varied, the implementations of committee arrangements that had actually occurred were remarkably similar, indicating convergence of experienced practitioner views on this subject.

This was quite a remarkable outcome that was worthy of further exploration. It was evident that there was veracity in this coalescence of practice that had emerged which would be worthwhile documenting. Consequently, any items that participants indicated were important to either have or avoid in achieving successful committee governance were coded as contributing to either success or failure. The desirable features were listed together with the items to avoid, with the latter expressed inversely where possible to achieve positive wording. This produced a set of 10 committee governance operating parameters. These parameters emerged principally from the responses to this question (Q3), with a few emerging from the responses to Q4. The final list is presented below in Table 2. The participants whose responses to this question provided the basis for each factor are noted after each factor, together with any contributions that came from Question 4. The wording has been synthesised into a cohesive whole by the principal author, following the essence and intent of participant statements.

Table 2
Operating parameters for Project/ Program Committee Governance

#	Operating Parameter
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1	Ensure that the project is big enough or different enough or there are a sufficient number of projects in a program to warrant this level of governance overhead (i.e. don't unnecessarily introduce this additional layer of bureaucracy. Committees should not be used as a substitute for the project or program manager being empowered to undertake adequate consultation). (6C, 20B)
2	Ensure that if the committee, as distinct from the chair, is to actually make decisions that these decisions do not overlap with any existing organisational accountabilities. (17C, 18B)
3	Committee members should have ownership and buy-in, be interested and engaged, prepared to follow the Terms of Reference (TOR) and recognise the difference between their roles in the project/ program governance structure and their roles within the organisation structure. That means people organisationally junior to you may have a more senior project governance role than you, which needs to be respected. The focus needs to be on facilitation rather than saying no. Don't ask for reports you aren't going to read and don't use your membership of the committee to attempt sink the project. (4C, 5D, 21F) (7C, 10C, 12C, 19E in Q4)
4	The number of members should be limited, while ensuring all the necessary project governance interests are represented. Advisers and possibly observers can attend but not participate, upon the invitation of a committee member, with concurrence of the chair. (11B)
5	Members must have decision making authority in their own area even though they may not be authorised to make decisions under the TOR of this particular committee. (7C, 11B, 12C, 19E, 21F)
6	The TOR must be clear on committee roles and specify what decisions can/ are to be made, how they are to be made (e.g. decision of the chair, consensus, majority vote, all members having veto rights), what advice is to be provided to whom and what support is to be provided to the project(s). (6C, 16C, 20B)
7	If the decision-making authority rests with the chair, the TOR should make it clear that committee members are there to assist the decision maker and provide advice. They have the power to influence and a role to do so, but not to decide. (Of course, they do have to decide on behalf of the part of the organisation they head whether to support or oppose propositions and will be held to the commitments of resources or assistance made in the meetings). So, the actual owner of the outcome of the project is best as the chair. (14B, 16C, 21F)
8	Committees and their members should not lightly involve themselves in the day to day running of the project/ program. They should have the necessary knowledge and experience to foresee project needs and make critical timely decisions that enable the project to progress unimpeded. They should then get out of the way to let the project/ program get on with it, unless and until the project/ program asks for assistance or it becomes evident that the project/ program is not heading in the direction intended. (2G, 17C, 21F)

9	The committee should concern itself with supporting the project/ program, keeping in mind the suitability of its outputs to achieve its strategic outcomes, the technical and financial viability of the project/ program and whether it should continue in its current direction. This is particularly so at major milestones. (14B, 21F)
10	Legitimate internal conflicts of interest are reduced or avoided if the owner of the outcome, the owner of the output and the owner of the budget are the same person. (21F in Q4)

Note 1: These operating parameters all deal with committee arrangements only. It was evident from participant responses that ensuring the parent organisation has good processes in place for its projects is a separate exercise, and that shunting the governance of this task off to some project steering committee that has no control over organisational governance does not work.

Note 2: Parameters 3, 4, 8 and 10 deal with significant differences between some general management and project management practices.

Q4: – Feelings evoked by the term Governance

The question asked was “What feelings does use of the term (governance) evoke for you? “

Responses were generally in terms of reactions to good and bad governance and indicated that the term evokes a wide range of strong emotions - ranging from excitement through to despair, aggravation and frustration. One laughed (14B) when asked the question. One ironic response was “It depends which end of it you're on” (6C). The overall feeling can be broadly summarised as indicating that you get good feelings if the governance is good and you don't if it isn't. The responses of excitement and challenge and of pleasure and pain aligns with the Yin-Yang theme observed by Whitty (2010), which he described as “Fear/ nervousness mixed with thrill/ excitement – towards the challenge”.

Confusion around the meaning of the term, came up in many responses (7C, 11B, 14B, 15B and 16C). “Governance can be misunderstood” (16C). “You have to make sure the other person is using the language in the same way you think.” (15B). “In our organisation it was bandied around a lot to mean a whole lot of different things” (11B). One mentioned its “buzz-word” status (14B). This definitional confusion was well articulated by 7C as follows:

The term is so confused, and people don't respect it in the way it should be. Here we have complete misunderstanding of governance and people try to make it something that it's not. You just need to have clear line of command. They'll use it as an excuse to create a governing body when one's not there, or as a reason to circumvent process or legislation. There's a lack of willingness to define governance... People find it very difficult to articulate governance because what happens is egos get bruised along the way, so people who think they're important find out they're not important and that's one of the critical factors.

This means that the governance definitional space has become competitive and therefore open to manipulation as individuals seek to promote their views and influence outcomes in ways favourable to them. This was also evident in the comments of 21F reported above in

response to Question 3 regarding his frustration with people seeking to subvert by bringing in other governance measures for their own purposes/ advantage. This is also supported by (Whitty, 2010) who noted "project managers utilise various artefacts associated with project management in an emotional way to increase their competitive advantage in the organisational environment".

7C also explained this confusion occurred because the organisational structure is not the same as the governance structure. But it was evident that despite this terminology confusion, workable arrangements had been put in place, with 16C commenting that they were not doing gateway reviews anymore as things weren't going wrong.

One consultant (14B) noted a "lack of knowledge broadly across a range of industries on what good project governance looks like... I have observed this in government, banking and finance, and broadly across other industries including mining and retail". This provides further affirmation that the answer to the research question is affirmative.

14B also referred to people broadly having a sense of what governance is but being unable to apply that. This coincides with the observation made in reporting the results of Question 3 above, that language represents meaning rather than being meaning itself and that it is possible to sense things without necessarily being able to put that sense into words.

The responses to this question confirmed the answers to the research question derived from the earlier questions.

Discussion

As noted several times in the above reporting of results, confusion over what governance actually means was found in the practitioner interviews. This enables the research question to be answered affirmatively.

Given that confusion was found, it was surprising that participants had come to remarkably similar committee governance arrangements; they just used different words and had different preconceptions about them. Given that the participants all had between 20 and 45 years working experience, and were all concerned with getting things to work, it is perhaps not quite so surprising that they had arrived at similar arrangements, even though they came from different segments of different industries. But this raises the question of how to reconcile this with the differences in their understanding of the term.

To interpret these differences, we will take the lead from the literature review by considering the values contained within these particular views. To provide a framework for doing this, we will canvass some views from other relevant literature.

Reconciling the differences

The participants listed so many facets of governance that the metaphor of light reflecting in all directions from a diamond comes to mind. In a similar way, meaning seems to be attributed to governance in all sorts of ways. While some appreciate an ever-changing meaning, others focused on the meaning from one particular facet. Participants seemed able to sense the meaning of governance but not quite distil or determine or verbalise its essence. This is perhaps symptomatic of the way we human beings come to understand and form concepts; by experiencing different aspects of them until we feel we can appreciate a coherent whole.

This aligns with the "desensitisation" interruption of the sensation part of the gestalt cycle of experience (COE) in which one may be "less sensitive to inner and environmental stimulants" (Zwikaël and Bar-Yoseph, 2004) leading to inappropriate information being gathered and consequently, the real problem not being identified. However, here, the real problem of establishing workable governance arrangements had been satisfactorily achieved and it was the 'unreal' problem of definition or conceptualising what had been done that was in discord. This again suggests looking in the direction of unseen values.

A different metaphor of sightedness could be used, expanding slightly upon the Hindu fable of the blind men appraising an elephant, as expressed in the poem by Saxe (1873). The blind men touch different parts of the elephant and each assert with certainty that it is like a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan and a rope, but "Each in his own opinion, Exceeding stiff and strong, Though each was partly in the right, And all were in the wrong!". The partially sighted perceive some outline form of the whole animal, sensing its power and potential; the fully sighted observe it being led in a direction; some of those may not want it to go that way and wonder what they can do about it and how its heavy momentum can be redirected. Governance seems to be experienced in a similar way, where practitioners appraise what it is, dependent on their various experiences and exposures to it. For some within the practitioner group interviewed, this seemed to have been pre-conditioned by their exposure to PRINCE2 and the way that has approached steering committee decisions. Those that had either direct or indirect exposure to it verbalised those committees as decision making but did not act in that way. This aligns with the "confluence" interruption of the closure part of the gestalt cycle of experience (COE) in which "Total lack of criticism may lead to close without real and full resolution of the problem" (Zwikaël and Bar-Yoseph, 2004). While that may be the case, that still does not lead us to a framework that deals with values.

Eastman and Bailey (1994) noted the centrality of value conflict in management and the need to understand the values that guide management inquiry. They developed a typology which they presented in two dimensions, uniformity-diversity and economic-cultural. This can provide a suitable framework to consider why the views we found were so diverse and how a common implementation could have been arrived at, from or in spite of them. We had excluded issues of education or training or inexperience by selecting only experienced practitioners for interview. That led us to consider their personal motivations in implementing governance arrangements.

Typologies of motivations

The possibilities ranged from self-interest to altruism. Base self-interest could come from either ego or money and altruism could come from either dogged belief in a particular system or a desire to implement whatever was thought to work best for the common good. This can be represented by four typologies as follows:

1. Altruistic desire for the common good
2. Dogmatic belief in frameworks
3. Desire for control and aversion to being controlled = ego/ power seeking
4. Promotion/ funding prospects.

These typologies correspond loosely with those of Eastman and Bailey (1994). Their uniformity-diversity contest is present in Typologies 2 and 3 and their economic-cultural dimension is present in 1 and 4.

Analysis of typologies of motivations

The interview data was examined and evidence of all four typologies was found.

Altruistic desire for the greater good

It appeared that all participants desired arrangements that worked and this could be regarded as an altruistic desire for the greater good. However, this was not a factor differentiating their stated views which in some cases belied the arrangements they had put in place. However, it did seem to be a significant factor in them having arrived at a common implementation of the governance concept. To have achieved that, they had to have taken action they found to work, but then rationalised or expressed their views about the concept differently.

Dogmatic belief in frameworks

Part of the differing understandings of the concept appeared to arise from a belief in or a commitment to what seemed like an almost ideological project management position. This was that various project management frameworks, such as PMBOK, PRINCE2 and MSP, are absolute truth, rather than alternative representations of reality. They are positivist frameworks and are supported by "The vision that Comte and Mill shared of a science that could resolve issues of value and better the human condition (which) is alive and well in management" (Eastman and Bailey, 1994). Of course, belief in a framework can also accord with self-righteousness, pointing to the external authority for 'proof'. However, these frameworks actually have different premises as well as some definitions not generic to all circumstances. By sampling across engineering infrastructure and IT, such differences became evident, even though their exact nature did not emerge and required separate investigation to determine. We also note that this ideological approach also provided a very effective means for IT ideas to infiltrate engineering infrastructure, in spite of the latter's long history of project management and 5D noting "but with software, it is still a discipline in its infancy".

Desire for control and aversion to being controlled = Ego/ power seeking

7C mentioned egos getting bruised, which is relevant to the power/ control/ promotion issue. 7C was referring to people with senior organisational positions finding they did not have the authority they may have expected to have over project organisations that existed within their own organisations and having to emotionally deal with that. This also gets to the struggle project management has had in gaining acceptance from general management. 21F also noted people bringing governance in as a means of subversion for their own purposes and advantage.

Promotion/ funding prospects

The extent to which participants appeared to adopt an ideological view appeared to relate to their position in the hierarchy as the most senior people were the least dogmatic on frameworks. This brings into consideration the inter-related matters of simple desire to succeed in what one does, the desire for the control necessary to do it and the interplay between those things and one's economic prospects, i.e. promotion - the public-sector equivalent of the private sector money focus. None of the participants actually mentioned promotion. It appeared to be both unspoken and unseen. One alluded to it, and to the issue of power/ control in responding to the question on how he felt about governance, replying "It depends which end of it you're on" (6C).

Observations

These typologies do not all provide motivation in the same direction and some e.g. 1 and 3, or 1 and 4 can be in total conflict. We further note that governance can be a useful pawn in career advancement and political games as it sounds so important that the first one to claim alignment with the term in a contested situation can win; one's career prospects can hinge on creating the appearance of implementing good governance and therefore knowing what governance is. Not knowing or appearing not to know could be disastrous.

It is also apparent that lack of definitional precision and agreement can feed all four typologies but cannot provide a satisfactory epistemological base for any knowledge. For some conceptual terms, it can be quite difficult to distinguish what we know from what we think we know. This is difficult to recognise and combat. It requires active discourse to agree on what it is we actually mean before we can confidently assign an agreed meaning to a conceptual term and then consider that to be ontology i.e. what we know as distinct from what we think we know. Note that we are distinguishing here only between what we think a term means and what we all agree it means; we are not actually referring to the actual meaning represented by the word. We consider language to be just another way/ means/ framework we use to represent meaning, as did John Stewart Mill:

The meaning of a term actually in use is not an arbitrary quantity to be fixed, but an unknown quantity to be sought. ... To fix the connotation of a concrete name, or the denotation of the corresponding abstract, is to define the name... which is vulgarly called defining not the name but the thing. What is meant by the improper expression of defining a thing ... is to define the name, subject to the condition that it shall denote those things (Mill, 1874).

We consider realisation of and vigilance on this matter essential to achieving clarity and agreement in the definition of governance, and of conceptual terms generally.

Such error can be seen in Hasselman (2017) in the literature review who distinguished between positivism and constructivism to differentiate between the three terms she was dealing with (adaptive management, adaptive co-management and adaptive governance). In doing so, she overlooked the prior problem that it was the constructivism (knowledge constructed by the learner) that preceded the ontological assumption that introduced all these other things into governance. Such 'ontology' can stem from the epistemological error of basing what we think we know on something someone says, when they may have just arbitrarily decided it, or it may have just suited their convenience at the time. This appears to be what has happened with the governance concept, where arbitrary assumed knowledge has been constructed by some previous users of the term.

It is therefore evident that wherever confusion in terminology is identified, it is advisable to go back and eliminate that unnecessary confusion, then proceed back to where we were and see how many unnecessary (i.e. non-existent or fake) problems have gone away.

During the interview process there were also two items raised that had not been included in the academically derived McGrath and Whitty (2015) definitions given in the literature review above. These were records and audit. These are most important and can easily be overlooked. They would most appropriately be added to the definition of organisational governance arrangements, which was their one definition by extension rather than by intension. The following revision is therefore proposed, with the additions shown bolded and the reporting arrangement items rearranged in order of immediacy:

- Organisational governance arrangements = an entity's structure (component parts, inter-relationships), positions (roles, responsibilities, pay levels and numbers), rules (written and unwritten, including policies, procedures, codes, methodologies and conventions), decision making processes (including financial and other delegations, as well as approval processes) **records** and reporting arrangements (financial, progress, stakeholder, assurance, **audit**, regulatory, annual).

In light of the definition of governance found in the literature review as the system by which an entity is directed and controlled, governance can be further considered in light of the support found for the above four motivational typologies as a social mechanism or machine for increasing power. That social machine is invisible. Its moving parts are abstract things such as meetings, rules, laws, practices, policies, decisions and peoples' roles, along with means of compulsion. Governance is an arrangement of these things, the mechanism that enables people to become aligned with some intent or strategy, enabling its implementation. It enables the harnessing of power or of the will to do something. Power can be gained by aligning people with a particular intent and governance is the means of doing this.

Implications

This investigation demonstrates the importance for practitioners as well as for researchers of first agreeing on what it is we are all talking about. Development of the world is done through projects. If governance is as important as the World Resources Institute (2018) claims, then it is important that the projects delivering development do not lack clarity around their governance arrangements - as this cannot but reflect in unintended waste of time, effort and funding. This process can be facilitated by viewing language as a framework to represent meaning rather than as being meaning itself and by stating clearly what we understand key conceptual words to signify.

We do not address here any normative issues with any particular governance implementation. This investigation simply provides an example of one circumstance where it would be a really good idea if we all knew exactly what it is we are all talking about i.e. explicitly agree what we understand a label given to a concept to mean before we attempt to address/ debate/ fight over normative issues by evaluating good or bad relative to one particular set of values. This means making definitions explicit and developing common language so that, in enthusiasm to get to the values, slight errors don't magnify, get out of control and develop into separate, unproductive and unnecessary conflicts, activities or even industries.

The philosophical aversion towards definition that has occurred in recent decades is typified by the family resemblance concept of definition developed by Wittgenstein and Anscombe (1958), and continued by Haugaard (2010), Seidl (2007) and others. That approach treats language as meaning, rather than as just another framework for representing meaning. It consequently excuses definitional looseness and ignores the importance of silent or assumed qualifiers, as pointed out by McGrath and Whitty (2017). It allows anybody to define anything they like, in contradiction of Mill (1874). (See his quotation in the previous section).

Given the persistence of this philosophical error, it would be most desirable to review the governance terminology in various project management practitioner reference documents and methodologies.

Limitations and future research

The limitation of this work is that it is based upon a sample of organisations and industries in one state in one country. While the factors mentioned above in sample selection should result in world-wide trends affecting its local participants, there is no guarantee of that.

The interview responses also indicated that confusion exists over the boundaries between ethics, management, strategy and leadership, indicating that further definitional work on these subjects would be worthwhile. Power was also identified in the discussion as another concept that would benefit from clear definition.

Further investigation into the governance terminology in various project management practitioner reference documents and methodologies also appears warranted.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to the debate on governance and its definition by documenting the collection and analysis of data from experienced project management practitioners across a range of industries and disciplines in Queensland, Australia. It confirmed that the confusion in governance terminology present in academic publications is also present in that practitioner sample. It also found that experienced practitioners had nevertheless been able to achieve satisfactory implementations of governance but were unable to articulate governance in a way that indicated agreement on the meaning of the term has been reached. The characteristics of these implementations were extracted and synthesised into a set of operating parameters for committee governance. A typology of motivations was then developed to identify the drivers for developing divergent definitions of the governance concept accompanied by implementation of common committee governance arrangements. Evidence of the presence of these typologies was found in the data, indicating that participants' value judgements had affected their view of what governance actually is i.e. its definition. Overlooking the need to explicitly reach agreement on the meaning of conceptual terms was identified as producing faulty epistemology leading to false ontology. A need to examine the definitions of governance terms in practitioner reference documents and methodologies was concluded, together with the need to properly define various other terms commonly used in association with governance. It was also proposed that records and audit be added to the definition of organisational governance arrangements located in the literature review.

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