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Do Steering Committees really steer?

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate confusion among project management practitioners about the role of steering committees.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with highly experienced participants selected from a range of industries and disciplines in Queensland, Australia.

Findings – Six separate confusions on the role of steering committees were identified within that practitioner community. However, despite participants expressing various opposing views, they had actually come to the same working arrangements for their committees; all that was missing was a common conceptualisation of these working arrangements and consistent terminology.

Research limitations/implications – The paper provides clear evidence to the academic literature that confusion over the role of steering committees actually exists within the practitioner community and identifies six separate ways in which this occurs. It also identifies a problematic error in the widely used PRINCE2 governance model. Clarity in committee governance arrangements will facilitate future research endeavours through removal of confusion surrounding committee labelling and accountability.

Practical implications – A committee decision tree model that guards against all six confusions is proposed for practitioner use, providing a means of avoiding unnecessary internal conflict within organisational governance arrangements. It can be used to check TORs (Terms of Reference) of existing or proposed committees, facilitating organisational efficiency and effectiveness. The suggested renaming of PCGs from project control groups to project coordination groups, and discontinuance of the practice of labelling committees that cannot authorise their decisions as either steering committees or boards, further supports this.

Social implications – Reconciliation of terminology with actual practice and the consequent clarity of governance arrangements can facilitate building social and physical systems and infrastructure, benefitting organisations, whether public, charitable or private.

Originality/value – Clarity regarding committee accountability can avoid confusion, misunderstanding and consequent waste of time, resources and money.

Keywords - project steering committee, project governance, project advisory committee, project board, committee decision tree, definition

Infrastructure projects, Project governance, Governance structures, Information and communication technologies, Organizational project management, Governance of projects, Project management, Project politics
Paper type - Research paper

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Introduction

Confusion has existed within project management scholarly publications over the role of steering committees, according to McGrath and Whitty (2013). They found the issue had been overlooked in the academic literature since the 1980s when the label of steering committee had been attached to ICT committees, regardless of whether these committees decided or advised.

The purpose of this research was to investigate whether the project management practitioner community is similarly confused regarding the role of steering committees. It also explored what adaptations that repeated application of the concept over the last few decades had produced regarding how this democratic device (steering committee) has operated within organisations having an authoritarian structure.

In this paper we review the literature on the steering committee. We then develop research questions and design the research by selecting the investigation instrument, designing the questions, selecting the sample, and determining the method of analysis and evaluation. We then outline the key characteristics of the participants selected before reporting the results, considering the issues identified, and considering a model to resolve the confusion.

Literature Review

Development of the steering committee was investigated by (McGrath & Whitty 2013) who found steering committees were introduced in the 1980s to address a perceived lack of IT organisational power by attempting to influence or change existing power structures. This is evident in Grindlay (1981); Nolan (1982); Robey and Markus (1984). McGrath and Whitty (2013) found "no evidence of any consideration of how these committees would interact with existing power structures that were hierarchical and autocratic". They also noted the caution by Drury (1984) regarding the importance of whether a committee decides or advises and that this has been ignored in the academic literature since. They also pointed out that the steering committee was a democratic artefact introduced into authoritarian structures, with the potential to disrupt, and stated "The broad philosophical issue is when, where, how and why interspersing democratic structures within a hierarchical and authoritarian structure can actually work" McGrath and Whitty (2013). They developed a model for handling such an insertion. It asked a series of questions to determine whether the committee decides or advises. The model was intended to be applied when considering establishment of a committee. It can also be applied to an existing committee to see whether its method of operation is causing any governance conflicts. It starts with first determining whether a committee is actually necessary, based on the need for collaboration with and between stakeholders. If there is no such need then there is no need for having a committee as a committee is a device enabling collaboration. The rest of the model is concerned with determining whether the committee decides or advises. It does this by applying two tests to any notion that it will decide. The first test ensures the committee's accountabilities does not conflict with any organisational role. If there is any conflict, then a governance conflict will result and so the committee should be set up as advisory only. The second test is whether there is an organisational role or committee that can over-rule it. If there is, then the committee can make recommendations only and it is advisory. If the answers to both tests are negative, then the committee can be regarded as decision-making.

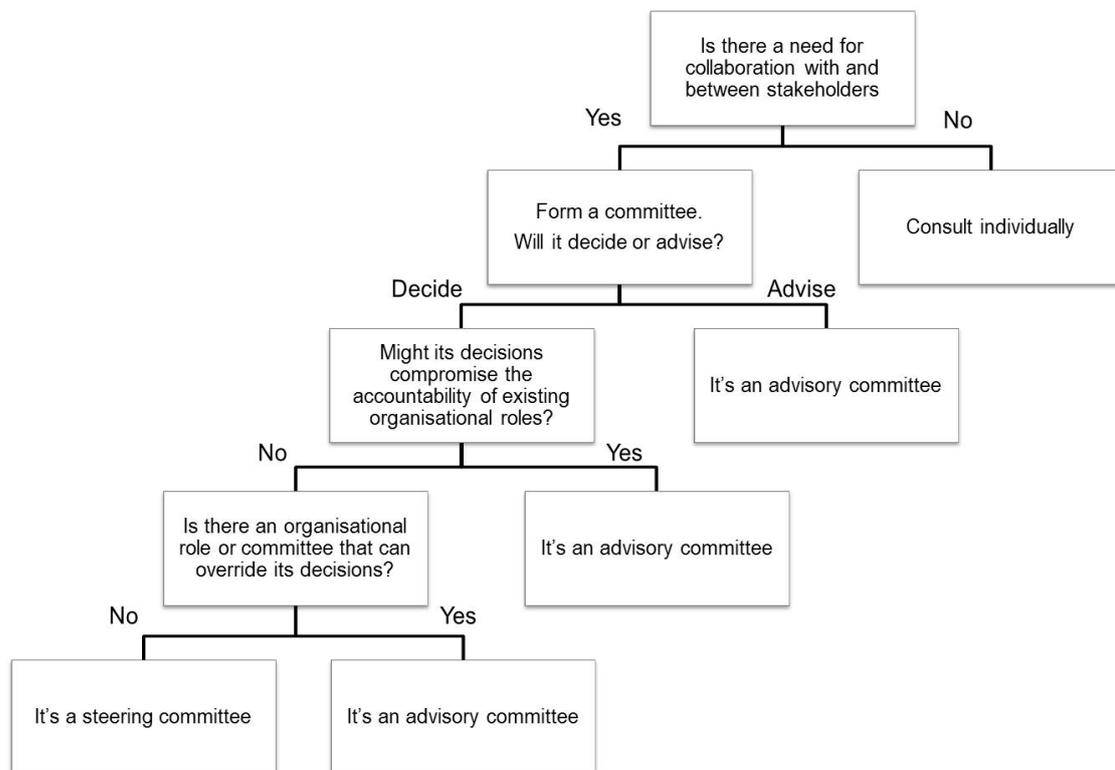 The McGrath and Whitty (2013) Committee Decision Tree model is shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Committee Decision Tree

(source: McGrath and Whitty (2013)

It appears from the literature that the original intention of inserting a democratic device into an authoritarian structure and then mislabelling that device as a steering committees was noble, as it was to give computer system users the ability to influence systems that they would use (Grindlay 1981; Robey & Markus 1984). However, application of the steering committee concept has not accommodated the ongoing operation of existing power structures in a sustainable way, as evidenced by Lechler and Cohen (2009, p. 46) noting that the "concept of a steering committee is neither clearly defined nor perceived in industry". They also noted "a general lack of research on the role of committees in the implementation of projects" (Lechler & Cohen 2009, p. 51). We note that it would have reduced the disrupting (ICT) influence in the 1980s to have made the subtle disturbance of existing power structures clear. Furthermore, branding it as a democratic device would have made it difficult to question at a time when the cold war was threatening the basis of western democracy. Nevertheless, early papers (Grindlay 1981; Nolan 1982; Drury 1984; Robey & Markus 1984; McKeen & Guimaraes 1985) warned of the dangers of steering committees. Nolan (1982) even stated committees had a bad name, but considered they were the best way to go. Lechler and Cohen (2009) classified steering committees by level (executive and business unit) rather than by purpose, function, or structure and noted "Our results indicate that the probability of project success or failure cannot be predicted exclusively from the presence or absence of a steering committee". They too ignored Drury's (1984) warning regarding whether the committee advises or decides. Reimers (2003, p. 348) mentioned a consequence of ignoring that advice; that "a majority-based decision-making principle (in the steering committee)

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would enable other managers to block such decisions”. McGrath and Whitty (2013) noted that "Many of the later papers that cited Drury (1984) made the assumption that 'steering' was a generic term that encompassed any committee involved with projects”.

McGrath and Whitty (2013) also noted:

> Calling the committee by the name 'steering', which Drury (1984) indicated was widely advocated in the systems literature at the time 'for groups concerned with MIS issues', means that steering was supposed to be inclusive of both recommending and deciding. This is logically inconsistent. These two options of harnessing available power are mutually exclusive. Steering a direction means making decisions, not making recommendations or providing guidance. So use of the phrase 'steering committee' as a generic term has been and still is a misnomer.

Recent academic publications on governance indicate that use of the term 'steering' referring to a group or committee is still prevalent. Muller (2017a, p. 18) says "Project governance… is typically executed by a steering group, which directs and controls the project manager”. Muller (2017b, p. 109) 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”.

Muller et al. (2017, p. 60) note that The Office of Government Commerce (OGC) in the UK proposes the PRINCE2 governance framework, which recommends that the Steering Group (or in their terms Project Board) is accountable to program or corporate management for the success (or failure) of the project”. They then continue to note a variety of models, noting "That begs the question of when such a steering group is appropriate" (Muller et al. 2017, p. 61). They continue as follows:

> Andersen (2008) highlights two circumstances in which steering groups staffed by line managers may be appropriate:
>
> When there is little or no familiarity with project work within the organisation
>
> When the project involves several organisations (Muller et al. 2017, p. 61).

They also note "If a project involves several organisations or enterprises, a steering group is essential… Issues connected with the project will obviously need to be dealt with by several executive managers, as many as there are companies in the alliance" (Muller et al. 2017, p. 61).

This recent literature questions the assumption of a universal need for all projects to have something called a steering committee or group or equivalent.

We conducted a literature review to locate any other evaluations of steering committees. We developed search terms by reasoning that any such evaluation of the steering committee device would have to have the term "steering committee" in its title, as such an exercise could not be conducted incidental to another investigation. We also decided to exclude extraneous references by searching for "project management" in all text. We decided to use the EBSCO database as it is an aggregator which searches databases from multiple sources.

An EBSCO search for "steering committee" in the title & "project management" in all text was therefore conducted and produced only five items of which only two were relevant. One was an opinion piece on the operation of steering committees and contained no references.

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The other was by Murphy (2016) who investigated factors contributing to steering committee performance within an information processing environment. He "found that practitioner literature and academic journals offered little more than anecdotal information on the inner workings of SCs (steering committees), leaving managers guessing at what approach and remedies would work best" (Murphy 2016, p. 1). He also noted that "Earlier studies found that many things are called "steering committees" and the term remains nebulous" (Murphy 2016, p. 3). His thesis did not question their history or labelling, and he did not define the term steering committee.

One of the findings from his qualitative interviews was that "Steering committees function better when there is a defined decision maker" (Murphy 2016, p. 57). This effectively says they work best when advisory; serving a communication function that supports the decision maker and providing a decision-making forum, but not actually having the authority to implement. This is at odds with his later statement "Autonomous decision-making improves a steering committee's capabilities and leads to improved satisfaction with development process" (Murphy 2016, p. 142). The two statements can only be reconciled if responsibility and accountability are aligned through the person with the decision-making authority being on the committee. This lack of specificity appears to have become enshrined in practice as, in a section titled Steering Committee Governance, he notes "use of a steering committee is considered a sound project management practice. Its pivotal role is reinforced in the practitioner literature such as in the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)"* (Murphy 2016, p. 135). There is a fundamental presumption that the steering committees equate with sound project management practice. This universality was challenged by McGrath and Whitty (2013), which was not referenced in Murphy (2016). Furthermore McGrath and Whitty (2015) resolved a definition of governance that is not dependent upon a steering committee. They presented a comprehensive mapping of governance terminology that is completely independent of committees.

A further EBSCO search for "steering committees" in the title & "project management" in all text and produced only three items; one was by Lechler and Cohen (2009) which we had already located and referred to above. The other two are as follows:

Loch et al. (2017) considers lessons for effective governance by steering committees. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 CEOs or senior executives across Europe and the Mediterranean across a range of process and service industries and identified five themes - or important items to pay attention to. While one of these was steering committee composition, the steering committee mechanism itself was not considered as a potential contributor. This paper was not a critical evaluation of the steering committee mechanism. It seemed to indicate acceptance of steering committees becoming involved in detailed management of a project as an indispensable part of governance without paying too much attention to whether it might compromise internal accountabilities or compromise the position of the project manager. This is evident from the general tenor of the paper and the interview questions, one of which asked: "Do you supervise different parts of the project differently?" This begs the question of what a steering committee would be doing getting involved in management and supervision of the project, indicating a high likelihood of authority of the project manager having been compromised.

Mosavi considered portfolio steering committees whereas we are primarily interested in project steering committees. However, he noted "research shows that there are speculations on whether project portfolio decision making should be done in groups (e.g. portfolio

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committees) or individually (e.g. portfolio manager)”. He also noted “Assuming that organizations might be better off to make project portfolio decisions individually, poses an important question about the roles of portfolio committees” (Mosavi 2014, p. 390). Interviews were conducted with such committee members from the R&D departments of three Danish companies that had PPM in place, producing 29 transcripts. Three roles were determined for these committees; communicating, negotiating and deciding. However, the mechanism itself was not critically evaluated and it was concluded that the three determined roles were related to two governance design factors namely frequency and duration of meetings.

A search of the Taylor and Frances database for articles with “steering committee” in the title (this database did not allow for a concurrent text search to select only project management) located 22 items, none of which evaluated the mechanism itself. Searching for the plural form produced 1203 matches. None of the few such titles examined were evaluations of the mechanism, indicating that the lack of granularity in the database search tool made the search unhelpful. A search of the Emerald database was also conducted for both singular and plural terms and both returned no results.

The literature review has therefore confirmed the existence of academic confusion over the definition and the role of the steering committee and located one model providing a means of determining whether a committee decides or advises.

Definition of steering committee

As the literature review found that that the “concept of a steering committee is neither clearly defined nor perceived in industry” (Lechler & Cohen 2009, p. 46), we will first derive a definition of the term so that we have a reference to compare with practitioner views. By steering, we take the Oxford Dictionary definitions of “steer” as to “guide or control the movement of (a vehicle, vessel, or aircraft), for example by turning a wheel or operating a rudder”, and *steering* as “the action of steering a vehicle, vessel, or aircraft”. However, this latter definition is recursive and therefore unacceptable, so we take the definition of the verb, strip it of its extensions to render it more general and apply it to the organisational context as “*controlling the actions of an entity*”. By *committee*, we take the Oxford Dictionary definition of “a group of people appointed for a specific function by a larger group and typically consisting of members of that group”, and strip it of its latter two superfluities to render it more general as “*a group of people appointed for a specific function*”. This therefore includes boards and parliaments as well as informal committees and committees set up by a single person. We therefore understand a *steering committee* to be “*a group of people appointed to control the actions of an entity*”.

This definition would indicate that the real issue being considered here is whether a particular committee is actually a steering committee or not. However, the model identified in the literature review has used the terminology decide versus advise, which would lead to using the terms ‘decision making committee’ and ‘advisory committee’. We will avoid this complication by simply referring to committees rather than to steering committees or project steering committees, except where the colloquial or participant usage dictates otherwise.

Research Questions (RQs)

The literature review found terminology confusion and a model for determining whether a particular committee decides or advises. We set out to explore whether similar confusion was

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present in the practitioner community and to test the veracity of the previously developed model.

The following research questions (RQs) were therefore developed:

RQ1: "What confusion exists in the practitioner community regarding the role of steering committees?"

RQ2: "Does the Committee Decision Tree model resolve any confusion identified in RQ1?"

Research Design

These RQs call for use of a qualitative method of data collection; it is not possible to express answers to these questions quantitatively. If confusions are identified in one place, then any denial of the existence of the issue can be definitely refuted, rendering possible the inference that it may be an issue in other places.

Instrument selection

The nature of the RQs suggests an interview approach as it is unlikely that satisfactory answers could be gained by survey. This is supported by Fontana and Prokos (2007, p. 23) who 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". The subject of steering committees attracts a diversity of opinion 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, p. 19) 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 & Prokos 2007, p. 20). This was appropriate for our particular RQs, and suggested use of a semi-structured interview which Wengraf (2001, p. 1) noted as appropriate for in-depth interviewing. Barriball and While (1994, p. 330); Fontana and Prokos (2007) 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, p. 162) 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 & Prokos 2007, p. 22). Whitty (2010) noted the influences of emotions in project management behaviour. We therefore wished to capture these emotions. 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. Their questions were a mixture of open and closed. The actual questions used in this

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study were tailor-made for the RQs and were only very loosely based the actual Kummerow and Kirby (2013, pp. 542-4) protocol as their investigation occurred within a contained organisational boundary and was more amenable to statistical analysis than the RQs posed here.

For our particular RQs, it was appropriate for the majority of questions to be open, with closed questions being used principally as prompts.

The interview strategy was to first confirm the background/ context of the person by determining various classificatory factors, then ask the pre-determined interview questions. The background/ 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), ICT = Information and Computer Technology, including ICT infrastructure, BD = Business Development).

These backgrounds were considered to cover the predominant local project management cultures.

Semi-structured interview questions were then developed to capture as many perspectives on steering committees as possible. The approach was to have evaluation questions that covered both the extent and nature of these committees before evaluating their operation. The initial evaluation question (Q1) therefore addressed their extent, with Q2 and Q3 exploring the nature of their operation and Q7 examining the variation off this over time. The remaining questions (Q4, Q5 and Q6) explored their method of operation.

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

1. To what extent does your organisation rely on committees?
2. What power is given to these committees and how do they exercise it?
3. What decision-making responsibilities do these committees have? (These may be different for different committees. If so, list them?
4. How effective are these committees?
5. What conflict arises between committees and organisational roles?
6. How is this conflict managed/ resolved?
7. Do project committee roles or mandates vary during the project lifecycle?

The open-ended questions (1 to 6) were intended to prompt participant discussion. The single pre-determined closed question (7) was designed to explore reasons for any variations over time.

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.

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Sample selection

As noted above, a qualitative approach was adopted, rendering statistical analysis inappropriate. It was therefore not necessary to have a statistically significant minimum sample size, as would be required 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.

The sample was selected so that all the backgrounds considered predominant in the previous section were represented. The criterion was to cover the diversity of possible views rather than to achieve any minimum sample size within all groups. Notwithstanding that, we were particularly interested in the engineering infrastructure/ ICT interface which presented the major cultural distinction.

More recently, Guest et al. (2006) have indicated a sample size of 6 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 particularly interested in covering cultural differences between engineering infrastructure and ICT and given the literature review found previous ICT practitioner interviews but none in engineering infrastructure, we set out to interview at least 12 with an engineering infrastructure project background plus at least 6 from an ICT background.

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

The sample location was also considered. The researchers are based in Queensland, Australia, and consideration was given to whether participants would be selected locally 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 Project Management Body of Knowledge (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. 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 were identified, their agreement obtained, and potential candidates approached. 21 experienced project managers agreed to participate and were interviewed,

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exceeding the requirement for theoretical saturation. Several of those interviewed headed large infrastructure delivery organisations.

Method of analysis and evaluation

The responses of participants were recorded, transcribed and then compared on a question by question basis. The evaluation of RQ1 is straightforward from the perspective that if everyone interviewed indicates the same understanding of the role of steering committees, 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 confusion over steering committee operation can be considered established. Any differences of view will be reported and analysed, observing themes as they emerge. Those themes will then comprise the confusions that will provide the answer to RQ1. These will then be analysed individually.

RQ2 will be analysed by determining whether the themes/ confusions that emerge from RQ1 can be avoided by the committee decision tree model identified in the literature review.

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 seven organisations of which four were in the private sector (two separate consultancies, one multi-national manufacturing company and one educational institution) two from the Government sector (a state government department and a local government department) and one which straddles both – a commercialised state government authority. All had offices in Queensland, Australia.

The distribution by industry area was four from private industry (one from each company), 16 from government (seven from state (one of whom was a contracted consultant) and nine from local (one of whom was a contracted consultant)) and one was from the hybrid organisation (who was also a contracted consultant).

The distribution of work types engaged in was nine in physical civil infrastructure, six in ICT, one in business development, one in manufacturing, one in academia/ buildings, and three in multiple work types (two in infrastructure and business development, one in physical infrastructure and ICT).

The full taxonomy of the interviewed group is given in Table 1 showing 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	ICT
5	D	H	SGA&C	ICT&I
6	C	G	LG	I
7	C	G	LG	I

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8	B	G	SG	I
9	B	G	SG	I
10	C	G	LG	ICT
11	B	G	SG	I
12	C	G	LG	I
13	C	G	LG	ICT
14	B	G&P	SG&C	ICT
15	B	G	SG	I
16	C	G	LG	I
17	C	G&P	LG&C	ICT
18	B	G	SG	ICT
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	ICT=Information & Computer Technology, including ICT infrastructure
H=Hybrid	LG=Local Government C=Consultant M=Manufacturing E=Education	BD=Business Development

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 for each of the seven interview questions are reported below and the themes that emerge from them are underlined progressively before being discussed in the following section.

Question 1 (Q1) – Reliance on committees
The interview question asked was "To what extent does your organisation rely on committees?"

The participant responses were assessed to see whether their organisation's reliance on committees was H - high (or heavy), M - moderate or L - low. 16 were assessed as H, 3 as M and 2 as L. Of the ones assessed as H, six actually said high or heavy, one said "hugely", one said "a fair bit", one said "to quite a degree" and one said "too much". The 16 Hs were from five large organisations - two government, one government owned corporation and two private organisations. The 3 Ms were from the two government organisations from which other participants' views were assessed as H. These were both delivering infrastructure and related services for which ICT was a support function and these responses were not from ICT work areas. The two Ls were from a small and a medium private sector consultancy in the infrastructure work area.

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The responses revealed an astounding number of committees, leaving the researchers with a general impression of over-governance existing in the practitioner community. 13C said "ICT has been governed to death, honestly. … The new CIO is purging them. There are 25 committees overseeing things in our ICT area. We think that's overkill." One who was not from ICT (2G) referred to having six levels of committees in their organisation. 7C from engineering infrastructure said "It starts from the top and doesn't stop. There's the top-level committee and you committee your way down forever ... Every project has to be represented by a PCG (Project Control Group)".

Engineering infrastructure participants reported fewer committees than those in ICT, with several infrastructure participants mentioning that not every project needs or has a steering committee and 11B (G) saying "If they have no purpose, we don't have them. Where we set one up, we put a lot of effort into making sure it operates properly. Larger projects have steering committees".

Those from small to medium consultancies did not set up steering committees at all. As 19E said "We rely on committees outside our organisation to be making decisions" These organisations seemed to leave committees to the government, as 17C noted in saying "I think it's a public-sector thing". However, the comments of 1A and 2G here would suggest that the influence has spread beyond the public sector, albeit that the number of levels in one such private sector organisation (1A) was quite controlled whereas another (2G) said "there's probably at least six levels of committees, constantly reporting upwards". The smaller private sector organisations appeared not to have been drawn into the difficulties that some committee arrangements can bring. This could have been due to those organisations not being large enough to either need such arrangements or to fail to notice the inefficiency of diluted accountability that introducing them into a short management chain would bring. 19E from a medium size infrastructure engineering consultancy said their committees were "organisation related, not project related and are related to broad specific objectives but are not management". 21F from a small engineering infrastructure and business development consultancy said "Steering committees are solutions that are thrown at problems rather than using a rigorous approach to the allocation of responsibilities".

Comments on committee operations raised by participants included 16C from engineering infrastructure noting that "Most committees are either advisory or approve certain things" and 17C from ICT saying "It just abrogates responsibility. A committee can't be accountable - only individuals can … Committees are run by TORs (Terms of Reference) and I think you would use the term responsibilities rather than accountabilities". 1A from private industry said "The sponsors would make decisions using the committee for advice. The committees never voted. I saw that in government. That was bizarre; I struggle with that concept". 11B from government infrastructure said "The steering committees are mainly about the outcomes, separate to the outputs. Any of the external people are from part funders. Other government departments are on some". 8G from government infrastructure said "There are so many programs and sub-programs and fingers in pies that aren't focused on delivery and outcomes and are more focused on expenditure".

Several made comments on the existence of committees. 3C from business development said "You can function without committees". 5D from infrastructure and ICT said "I'll more commonly engage people as needed ... I won't have a PSC (Project Steering Committee) all the way through ... For standard capital works I have no PSCs as they are line of business". 12C from a large engineering infrastructure organisation said "Steering committee is a great

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buzzword. Everyone has to have one".14B said "Small ICT projects may not have a board, just a project exec from the business". 15B in responding to an interviewer supplementary question "Does every project have to have a steering committee?" said "No... We have specific project committees and a few program boards". 20B said:

> I have a problem sometimes with people saying we really need to have a steering committee. Do they really need that or to just get a group of people to get together, sort something out and move on… A lot of them are more working groups... As soon as you call something a steering committee, everyone feels like they have to stick an Executive Director or a General Manager on it. You just have to challenge it all the time".

One commented on formal Gateway Review Committees, saying "We have stopped doing formal gateway reviews on our projects, although I conduct such reviews informally myself. They were discontinued because things weren't going bad anymore and our customers didn't want to pay for them" (16C).

Question 2 (Q2) – Committee power
The interview question asked was "What power is given to these committees and how do they exercise it?" Comments of note are extracted below.

The findings indicate that steering committees are potentially useful communication devices with the potential to be dysfunctional. As 21F said "I'm not a fan of committees. I'm a fan of clear governance". This and other responses indicated that many had also worked through the issues creating the difficulties referred by 21F and reached a workable resolution.

Many acknowledged that their steering committees performed an advisory function. The key to this appeared to be participants considering that it is the people on these committees who can be held accountable rather than the committees themselves (1A). This sentiment was expressed by many others as well. 2G pointed out that committees may have delegated decision-making authority "but only within a framework decided for them". 3C said "None have authority". 6C said "They are for collaboration and have responsibility not accountability - that's with owner and deliverer. Committees have responsibilities but are not entirely accountable". 7C said:

> The only power player is the project owner, the rest are advisors. PCGs don't make decisions. Project owners make decisions. The PCG is a decision-making group because the decision maker is there. If it meets without the project owner, it's only advisory and it's not a governance body. There's no such thing as a quorum, the project owner is either there or not.

13C said "The project owner or chair is the decision maker and has the highest power. The Senior User and Senior Supplier don't have any power but the chair listens to what they have to say". 14B said "For a project board, the project executive has ultimate authority; it's not a democracy". 16C said "PCGs are around scope and procurement. PCGs make decisions within bounds…The owner makes the decision, on advice ... the committee is really advisory even if it's called decision-making. Generally, there's consensus". 19E said "Our committees make recommendations only".

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Eight participants across engineering infrastructure, ICT and business development work areas and across four organisations explicitly mentioned that these committees were advisory relative to the organisational role that had the authority to make the decision.

Some however held the opposite view, with 10C saying "Steering committees have full decision-making and financial control" and 12C saying "Ultimate responsibility sits with PCGs as a decision-making group".

This establishes that that confusion over whether steering committees decide or advise does also exist within the practitioner community. Interestingly, it appeared that the confusion was semantic, as those maintaining that steering committees were decision-making were operating them in the same way as those who said they were not, as evidenced by 12C's response to Question 5, reported in that section below. This indicates that the conflict between authoritarian and democratic power models/ devices been resolved in practice by ensuring that within a bureaucratic or authoritarian structure, these committees have no accountability and are used as advisory communication forums to assist the person with authority at the meeting, who may be its chair, in making decisions.

Other responses highlighted other aspects of committee operation. 20B distinguished between boards and steering committees, noting "Some people call things steering committees that aren't … Some maintenance will have steering committees, but it's not a board… the terminology is an issue". 1A said "The committees I saw in government, I don't know why they were even there… Some people didn't even know why they were on these boards".

Other responses to this question were:

8B said "Whether there are individual project committees depends on scale. Large, complex projects need a project level group". Several others also noted similarly.

15B said "I'm on one. It's managed as a decision-making body and meets at milestones and makes decisions to move to the next milestone... It does make decisions on narrowing options or which options are taken through to the next milestone".

These responses point to a need for collaboration rather than control and to committees making some process decisions but not making the final commitment to implementation/ expenditure.

Question 3 (Q3) – Committee decision-making responsibilities
The interview question asked was "What decision-making responsibilities do these committees have? (These may be different for different committees. If so, list them)?"

The responses to this question were consistent with the analysis of the previous question, with 6 (1A, 3C, 13C, 14B, 16C, 19E) stating unequivocally that project steering committees had no decision-making responsibilities. One of these (19E) said "They are used for consultation and as a communication device. We like them to feel like they made a decision". Another (3C) said:

> I don't think there's anybody in their right mind that would set up a committee and give it free range. It's got to be answerable to someone. I've got into a lot of strife allowing these to continue and nipped them in the bud when I realised what I'd left there.

Only 2 unequivocally stated that they did have decision-making responsibility (4C and 12C).

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The remainder gave qualified answers, indicating some level of awareness of the potential confusion of responsibility with accountability. One said they did but only if the chair was present (7C), indicating that authority and accountability rest with the chair, not with the committee, with 14B noting “a PRINCE2 project board has no decision-making power. The entity doesn't have power”. Others felt that the steering committees did make some limited decisions. 15B indicated these decisions were within limits, saying that a steering committee “does make decisions … If it can't decide, will get the consultants to proceed with say both options to the point where a decision can be made. It's more about incremental narrowing down”. 20B made a similar observation in saying:

> There are some issues it makes decisions on and some things it can't approve, but you won't get approval unless the steering committee has endorsed it, so it does have power. They are there to give comfort to the decision makers.

Others made similar observations. From this and the responses to the other questions, it is evident that terminology regarding the word decision is an issue.

One response to this question mentioned a disciplinary committee that operated “like the rugby league judiciary” (2G), who also said “A committee wouldn't be dismissed; it would be individual members being reprimanded”. Disciplinary committees will be considered in the discussion section below, as will technical review committees, which were also mentioned by some participants.

Question 4 (Q4) – Committee effectiveness
The interview question asked was “How effective are these committees?”

The responses were assessed to see whether they considered the effectiveness of committees was H - high, M – mixed (medium) or L - low. 12 were assessed as H, 7 as M and 1 as L, with 1 N/A, saying the question was too broad.

The committee sizes were not asked but some reported their numbers. Some project control groups (PCGs) had the standard PRINCE2 number of three, one mentioned the ideal as “a smallish group of 5 -6 supported by a key suite of advisers” (8B) and one referred to a (non-project) committee of 30 - 40 people (2G).

While participant answers ranged from high to low, their observations were not inconsistent, identifying factors supporting and inhibiting committee effectiveness.

Factors mentioned as supporting committee effectiveness were:

- the members have a genuine interest,
- having a smallish group of five - six supported by a key suite of advisers,
- people understand their roles, members having a common vision on where they are going,
- having a solid Terms of Reference (TOR) with clear scope, role, reporting arrangements,
- “clarity around whether they are advisory or what the nature of the committee is” (3C),
- support from on high, especially when the project can't deliver because it can't get supplies from other parts of the organisation.

Factors mentioned as inhibiting committee effectiveness were:

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- a person is just there to feed back to somewhere else,
- people are time poor and delegate their attendance,
- multiple people pulling in all sorts of directions to stop, slow, or deviate,
- members who can't tell me their purpose on the committee,
- committees used as a blame smearing activity,
- delivery committees that include stakeholders who should be put off to one side and managed, so they don't obstruct, and
- committees that "haven't been fitted into the governance arrangements and just exist in the firmament" (21F).

Two participants mentioned the deciding versus advising issue (3C and 21F), corroborating identification of it as an issue by McGrath and Whitty (2013) as well as the affirmative answer to RQ1. The remark by 21F that his views were formed "around the late 70s early 80s when the term steering committee was starting to be used" also corroborates the findings of McGrath and Whitty (2013) tracing the usage of the term "steering committee" in the academic literature back to the early 1980s.

Question 5 (Q5) – Conflict with organisational roles
The interview question asked was "What conflict arises between committees and organisational roles?"

The responses were assessed on a Yes/ No basis as to whether their view indicated that such conflict existed or not. 11 responses were assessed as N, 9 were assessed as Y and one was N/A, offering no comment.

Many focused on internal committee conflict rather than conflict with the accountability of organisational roles. Several saw no conflict between committees and organisational roles giving the reason that these committees are not empowered to make decisions (19E, 6C and 9B). Conflicts between committees and organisational roles that participants mentioned were:

- around resources (1A) and money (15B),
- not everyone with a contributing interest being in the room (12C, 20B and 21F),
- committees becoming "zealots driving the organisation in directions it doesn't want to or have time to go in" (3C), which 2G expressed as "people have misused authority, unintentionally because their personal view differed from that of others" and 4C as "obstructing or second guessing" (4C),
- committees being established to appear to be doing something on an issue the organisation "doesn't want to deal with structurally" (3C) and "can be part of a piece of laziness on the part of the organisation. You think you've got the issue covered because you've got a committee. It's a bit of a political statement" (3C),
- inappropriate TORs, members and/ or the chair not understanding their roles (8B, 21F) and
- multiple governance structures that must co-exist - organisational, financial, project – not sitting together harmoniously (7C).

Several of these are symptomatic of the confusion surrounding whether these committees authorise or advise. One response to this question was relevant to Question 2, namely that of 12C in saying:

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There's no vote. It's not a democracy. The project owner is accountable. There is consultation at a PCG or Board level, but clearly the chair is the person who makes the decision. Does this mean these committees are advisory? No. They are decision-makers, but the ultimate decision is made by that person. You need to have all those people at the table. The committees do overlap with the chair, but the chair has the final decision.

Question 6 (Q6) – Conflict resolution
The interview question asked was "How is this conflict managed/ resolved?"

The responses were assessed on whether they indicated the means of resolution was H (Hierarchical) or O (Other). 16 gave responses that were assessed as answered H and 5 responses were assessed as O.

Many of the 16 whose response was assessed as indicating conflict was managed/ resolved hierarchically (H) said the chair/ sponsor/ project executive/ DG/ CEO/ CIO decides. Of those whose response was assessed as O (Other), apart from 19E, who said "It doesn't occur", all gave similar responses indicating some conflict resolution process. This was also indicated by five whose responses were assessed as H, who mentioned the consultation, communication and negotiation aspects of committees and the allocation of risk money.

Several other conflict resolution processes other than hierarchical were mentioned as follows:

- 4C said "stakeholder negotiation" and 21F said "ensuring there's a discussion with affected parties with view to resolving it".
- 11B said "Most of this stuff is either relationships or role clarity and mostly role clarity. If there's no reason to have a committee and there's someone accountable for it, then don't have one".
- 13C said "We offer to facilitate a process. We keep them on track and give them little cheat sheets that talk about emotional maturity (and) sabotage by not listening".
- 14B said "Alignment of governance with organisational structure is crucial to avoiding all of that conflict".

Question 7 (Q7) – Committee lifecycle roles
The interview question asked was "Do project committee roles or mandates vary during the project lifecycle?"

The responses were assessed on whether they considered their roles or mandates changed or not, with Y = Yes, N = No and M = Maybe. Most were explicit requiring little interpretation. 11 gave responses that were assessed as Y, 8 were assessed as N and 2 as M.

Many of those who said "no" responded from the perspective of the part of the organisation they were involved with rather than from the perspective of the full project. 6C made this explicit saying "Not for project delivery". 7C added "What you do may change but your role doesn't". 16C said "TORs are consistent all the way through. The members may change" and 10C and 20B expressed similar sentiment. 17C said "There are certain boards you go to at various points in the life cycle. The PCGs are periodical, the others come in at particular points & we deliver projects and don't do the total end-to-end project".

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13C said "the same roles will stay... The types of issues they deal with stay pretty much the same… We generally don't get a PCG until the project is all set up. The initiation generally won't have a PCG".

The responses to this question were interesting but yielded no additional information affecting the answer to either RQ.

Discussion

There are several themes that emerge from these results, each indicating a confusion existing in the practitioner community and collectively constituting the answer to RQ1. These themes/confusions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Steering Committee Confusions

ID	Confusion between	Resulting in
C1	Whether establishing a steering committee is warranted or not	A proliferation of committees
C2	Responsibility and accountability	Dispersion of accountability rather than single point accountability
C3	Authorising and deciding	Assigning labels to committees which cannot authorise that imply their role is at too high a level (i.e. steering or board)
C4	Deciding and advising	Belief that all committees given the label 'steering' are decision-making whether they are organisationally constituted to make implementation decisions or not.
C5	Steering committees and boards	Steering committees acquiring an ethos that their constitution does not support
C6	Democratic and authoritarian power models/devices	The democratic steering committee device potentially subverting an organisation's command and control structure

All six confusions are enmeshed, and all contributed to the differences of views that participants expressed. However, when it came to practical implementation, all participants who were dealing with un-constituted boards or steering committees had reached the same workable arrangements which did not actually allow the command and control organisational power to be countermanded or dispersed. This effectively recognised the potential for disruption, no matter what contrary or conflicting words they put around it.

The confusions identified in Table 2 are elaborated below.

C1 - Whether establishing a steering committee is warranted or not
This confusion emerged from the responses to Q1. Some considered all projects needed a SC (7C). However, many did not (11B, 12C, 14B, 15B, 19E, 20B) and from performance monitoring results some of these were claiming, this was not adversely impacting their project delivery and may well have been enhancing it. The most common determinant mentioned was project size, with some of those who did not routinely establish committees

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saying that they became necessary for large projects. 20B specifically mentioned the constant
vigilance required to ensure unnecessary and unproductive committees are not established.
The level that this can reach is evidenced by 13C saying there were 25 committees
overseeing things in their ICT area. The problem was by no means restricted to ICT areas, but
the number reached in that one area was astounding. An expression of the majority collective
view would be that steering committees are only necessary for large projects and that in many
cases, establishment of a temporary issue resolution or working group is preferable.

C2 - Confusion of responsibility and accountability

This confusion emerged from the responses to Q3. These two terms have been defined by
McGrath and Whitty (2018) as:

> Responsibility: an obligation to satisfactorily perform a task
>
> Accountability: liability for ensuring a task is satisfactorily done.

The confusion between these two terms was in regard to dispersion of them, which is dealt
with below and the origin of the confusion is then traced back to a particular source.

Dispersion of responsibility

Dispersion of responsibility is not the same as dispersion of accountability. The two concepts
have long been confused but have now been defined with the quite distinct and different
meanings given above by McGrath and Whitty (2018) who also confirmed the statement by
Cornock (2011) that responsibility can be delegated whereas accountability cannot.
Delegation of responsibility is useful and necessary for distributing work.

Dispersion of accountability

It is evident from the responses to Question 6 and also to other questions that committees
which decide hierarchically and do not vote, do not disperse accountability. Conversely, a
committee that votes does disperse accountability away from individuals to a single
accountable, representative entity, where that entity is properly constituted. A corporate board
clearly has accountability for the company it directs, and its constitution ensures that no one
individual can take complete control of the corporation to the disadvantage of the other
owners. There are other circumstances where dispersion of accountability is advantageous,
namely judiciaries/ disciplinary committees and appeal committees, as mentioned by 2G.

2G likened his organisational disciplinary committee to a sporting judiciary committee.
Sporting disciplinary committees disperse accountability away from both the organisation
and individuals within it. This can be useful for demonstrating independence or in protecting
and/ or supporting the individuals on such committees. However, the matters dealt with do
not compromise any organisational authority. Sporting judiciary committees do make
implementation decisions, but on behavioural matters only. They also apply a set of pre-
determined rules which they have authority to interpret but not to change. They do not
commit their parent organisation to any expenditure, resource allocation, organisational
change or strategic direction (other than their own operating expenses). Their function is to
prevent unsanctioned activity happening, not to initiate anything new. Consequently, having
authority to make implementation decisions on such matters does not conflict with the
authority of any proactive role in the organisation of which it is a part.

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Confusion between the two

There were two participants whose response to Question 2 indicated they viewed steering committees as having accountability. These two participants were in or associated with ICT. Consequently, the principal ICT source was investigated to see if it might contain the source of this confusion. PRINCE2 does not use the term "steering committee" but it does note in Section 19.10 that "the steering group is equivalent to PRINCE2's Project Board" (Murray 2009) and in Section 5.2.5 it notes that "PRINCE2 recommends that for completeness the Project Board should include representation from each of the business, user and supplier interests at all times" (Murray 2009). Section 5.3.2.2 lists the first duties of the Project Board as "Being accountable for the success or failure of the project in terms of the business, user and supplier interests" (Murray 2009). It also states under the heading of Authority that "the Project Board is accountable for the project" (Murray 2009). However, having asserted this accountability, it then goes on to say under the heading of 'Executive' that:

> Although the Project Board is responsible for the project, the Executive (supported by the Senior User(s) and Senior Supplier(s)) is ultimately accountable for the project's success and is the key decision maker. The Project Board is not a democracy controlled by votes. The Executive is the ultimate decision maker" (Murray 2009).

This is clearly internally contradictory and while the latter statement distinguishes correctly between accountability and responsibility as defined above, the earlier statements confuse these concepts. The contributing committee roles and the committee itself have responsibilities but not accountabilities.

This perpetuates the mistake of the 1980s identified by McGrath and Whitty (2013) long after the historical motivation of disruption to existing power structures has been forgotten. As concluded earlier, if a committee can decide something but cannot authorise implementation, then it is advisory. A proper board can authorise implementation of decisions. Most PRINCE2 project boards cannot do this and so the label is a misnomer.

This confusion has become 'generic' 'best practice' through being marketed as such. OGC self-declares "Since 2000 the Office of Government Commerce (OGC), former owner of Best Management Practice, has been the custodian of the portfolio on behalf of the UK government… The Best Management Practice portfolio covers a range of best management practices" referring to PRINCE2 MSP and other offerings (Office of Government Commerce 2017). AXELOS has continued declaring PRINCE2 and other products as "Best Practice Solutions" (AXELOS 2017). This provides an example of a practice thought to be 'best' and generic within the confines of one field, being applied universally to circumstances where it is not generic. Project Coordination Group would be a much more appropriate name for a PRINCE2 committee than steering committee or board and such a change to PRINCE2 would be highly desirable.

C3 - Confusion between authorising and deciding

This confusion emerged from the responses to Q3 and Q5 and warrants further analysis. The word 'decide' is defined in the Oxford dictionary as "come or bring to a resolution in the mind as a result of consideration". We therefore need to carefully consider who actually decides what. The committee may collectively resolve (=decide) what is best and the chair (or other person with authority, who may be present or not) will decide whether that resolution will be implemented. Of course, the whole point in a collaborative environment is to reach agreement on action that the person with authority will have no hesitation in

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implementing. But this nevertheless masks the reality of organisational power; that authority can over-rule a recommendation. In essence this is no different to deciding to take personal action on a difficult matter opposite to what one considers to be 'best' due to prevailing circumstances such as lack of power to do so. There are two decisions, one to come to a view on what is best and another on how to implement it, as any activist group attempting to influence authority would attest. The second requires having the authority to implement.

Those participants who considered that their project steering committees had no decision-making power were looking at their lack of organisational authority to implement the position they agreed to, making their decisions simply recommendations. Those who considered these committees made decisions were ignoring the authority to implement.

The project steering committee therefore provides a forum that includes:

1. a chair or other person who has the authority or power to authorise action for their project or organisation and
2. members who can influence the chair's desired outcomes due to their power to authorise action within their own contributing organisation - and who can witness what is happening and feel some sense of ownership due to their participation.

Even though the committee may collectively determine a feasible course of action, the members, apart from the authorised person, have no authority to decide to implement on behalf of the project or organisation. As many said or implied, there is no vote. The appearance of such a steering committee being able to authorise (decide to implement) is therefore an illusion which is supported by such decisions being published through the medium of committee minutes.

It is therefore necessary to be quite specific about where the authority to implement decisions actually lies.

A steering committee member can, of course, still gazump an implementation decision by failing to implement it within their own organisation, but that is a matter of politics and organisational tactics which we are not dealing with here.

C4 - Confusion between deciding and advising
This confusion emerged from the responses to Q2 and Q4. Several participants mentioned technical review committees and exploring their modus operandi is useful in understanding this confusion. Technical or quality review committees generally decide whether technical or quality standards of project outputs have been met or not. They then advise the higher entity that has the authority to decide on whether a project progresses or not. When a project output is not accepted by such a review committee and the project manager arranges remedial work, the project manager is accepting that whoever has the necessary power will agree with the committee and will require its decision to be implemented; so that committee only appears to have the authority to act on its decision. The authority actually lies with the person or entity the committee reports to. If a committee can be over-ruled, it is an advisory body, not a decision-making body. Even if the controlling person is on the committee, this does not change anything as "accountability cannot be delegated" (Cornock 2011) and rests with that person. There is a clear distinction necessary between committee members making their own decisions on how to approach matters before the committee and the committee itself actually having the authority to decide i.e. to implement whatever conclusion it may come to.

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In the circumstance where a recommendation of such a committee threatens entity reputation or survival, it can be overridden, and the recommendation ignored or modified. Business then proceeds through committee members either having their objection recorded or accepting the possible future liability consequences if they do not feel able to have their objection so recorded. Accountability for knowing sufficient to be able to form a view may well rest with committee members, but that is a different accountability with a different higher entity, such as legislation, professional body or public opinion. So, there are categories of decisions and making internal decisions does not make the committee itself a decision-making entity.

Participants mentioned numbers of other committee types; project, program and other name boards, PCGs and working groups. The names did not necessarily indicate whether they were steering (making decisions) or not. Various committee types can have various functions; some are responsible for making and implementing decisions (such as company boards of directors), some contain the person who makes decisions thus giving the appearance that the committee has the authority to implement its decisions when it does not (some project committees e.g. PRINCE2), some make and implement decisions on quite limited, specific matters (judiciary committees), some make recommendations on matters that the person they report to has to think very carefully about not accepting (technical standards/ quality review committees) and some simply provide a convenient forum for coordination. These committees all require their members to make internal decisions to be able to provide advice, but that does not mean their committees are decision making for the organisation.

C5 - Confusion between steering committees and boards

This confusion emerged from the responses to Q2. Corporate boards are legitimately constituted to make implementation decisions by voting. As shown above, project steering committees that are not managing joint ventures are not. They are designed as a means of communication and to provide a forum to facilitate the person with authority making decisions. Labelling them as boards is therefore misleading and risks inducing committee members and others into the delusion of thinking that the committee itself has the authority to implement. It also attempts to artificially inflate the importance of these committees by association of their name with corporate boards.

C6 - Confusion between democratic and authoritarian power models/ devices

This confusion emerged from the responses to Q2. The practitioners interviewed had dealt with the conflict between authoritarian and democratic power models/ devices by ensuring that within a bureaucratic or authoritarian structure, these committees had no accountability and that they were used as advisory communication forums to assist the person at the meeting with the authority, who may be its chair, in making decisions. Nevertheless, some held to the conceptualisation that they were decision-making. This has been discussed and resolved above in considering C2.

Applicability of the committee decision tree model

The common implementation solution that practitioners had arrived at, with their steering committees being subject to direction of the chair and therefore not actually making decisions to implement, corresponds with the result of applying the model. True steering committees that slip straight down the left-hand side are joint-stock company boards of directors and judiciaries including juries. Even where an appeal mechanism exists, some penalty or sanction or threat of same will remain until or unless overturned as the committee does have authority and can authorise. Any Joint-Venture (JV) arrangements, including alliances also

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slip straight down the left-hand side. Note that this accords with the observation of Muller et
al. (2017) noted in the literature review that a steering group is essential if a project involves
several organisations or enterprises. Voting within these arrangements generally operates on
an 'all have veto' arrangement rather than a simple majority, to avoid relative strength or
contribution issues, with discussion continuing until a resolution is reached that all can live
with. This is a democratic device where a voting arrangement other than a simple majority is
pre-agreed. Committees other than judiciaries and JVs within a bureaucracy cannot slip down
the left-hand side. They may seem to operate like a JV, but the key difference is that their
members can be directed, unlike a JV or company board.

C1 dealing with whether it is necessary to have a committee at all is accommodated by the
first question in the decision tree. The second box addresses C4, the deciding versus advising
question. The third and fourth boxes address C3 regarding where the power to authorise lies.
The whole model deals with C6, resolving the democratic versus authoritarian device
potential conflict, by proposing committees as forums for discussion and consultation. C5 is
addressed by the absence of the word 'board' from the model, but this does not preclude any
proper steering committee that can actually authorise being labelled as a board. The whole
model also deals with C2, ensuring that accountability is not compromised in the delegation
of accountability.

The model therefore provides a clear process for determining whether the committee decides
or advises and it also ensures there is no conflict between the democratic and authoritarian
devices by requiring committees to be established as advisory if there is any potential conflict
with organisational roles or if there is an organisational role or committee that can over-rule
it.

It is therefore evident that application of the model to check a committee's terms of reference
(TOR) before establishment can avoid the confusions and governance conflicts identified in
RQ1. This confirms that the answer to RQ2 is positive. Note that the model could also be
applied to existing committees to determine whether their role may be causing any
governance conflict.

Observations

It is noteworthy that none of the true steering committees (company board, JV board,
judiciary, disciplinary committee, appeals committee) actually have the label steering and
that any change of name would be most unlikely as their other names sound more important
anyway, as well as actually describing what they actually do. This leaves practically nowhere
that the steering committee title is actually useful and leads to the conclusion that most, if not
all committees labelled as steering do not and cannot actually steer.

It seems that practitioners have become comprehensively confused with imprecise definition
and labelling leading to inestimable loss of productivity. The extraordinary waste is referred
to by many participants in statements such as the 25 ICT committees mentioned by 13C in
response to Question 1 and the vigilance needed to stop the same thing happening in
engineering infrastructure mentioned by 20B in response to Question 1.

The working arrangements that the participants had arrived at reflect the reality that
committees that are not constituted to authorise can only recommend. Both recommending
and authorising, involve making decisions. In some areas where beliefs to the contrary have
become entrenched, such as in ICT areas following PRINCE2, it requires a paradigm shift to

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shed that erroneous view of "best practice" and recognise that there are only very limited circumstances within a bureaucracy where committees can be established that can actually steer – and this is on matters which are also very limited.

It would benefit clarity of governance if use of the terms steering committee and board were to disappear from project usage for circumstances other than where there are joint funding partners, such as alliance delivery contracts or planning studies of areas with overlapping geographical jurisdictions and joint funding arrangements. And judiciaries are not referred to as steering committees anyway.

The remaining committees are advisory and would be more appropriately labelled coordination committees, which for projects would have the same acronym as some currently use, namely PCG, with the C denoting 'coordination' rather than 'control'. That label sounds suitably important, befitting the communication role they play, but without misleading anyone through loose terminology into thinking they do something that they don't and what's more can't. It also avoids puffing up their importance with a more important sounding governance label. It describes much more accurately what they do within the power structure of a bureaucracy.

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 Australia does sit at a cross-road between England/ Europe, the Americas and Asia, and while global communication, global access to databases and the existence of internationally accepted bodies of knowledge mean that world-wide trends should be picked up in any local study, there is no guarantee of that.

During this study, data was also collected on project governance and the exercise of power and these will be analysed separately.

Future research could be conducted in other geographic locations. Research could also be conducted on the impact of committees being labelled as steering committees or boards when those committees have responsibility only and cannot have accountability

Conclusion

This paper has documented the collection and analysis of data from experienced practitioners concerning steering committee roles. It found that, not only was confusion present, there were six different ways in which it arose. It also found that while there was contention over terminology, the practitioners interviewed had nevertheless implemented common governance arrangements which were appropriate to their steering committees being advisory; they were simply unable to articulate that agreement due to the confusions identified. This arrangement was that the project steering committees recommended rather than authorised, and simply provided a forum for the person having authority (the power to implement) to reach a conclusion upon what to do.

It was also pointed out that this leaves practically nowhere that the steering committee title is actually useful. The answer to the question posed in the title of this paper is no; committees labelled as steering that are established within an authoritarian chain of command do not and cannot actually steer. It was noted that joint ventures will generally be labelled as boards rather than steering committees and that disciplinary committees do have the power to authorise penalties on individuals for behavioural breaches within the organisation without

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diffusing managerial accountability and are given labels other than steering that better reflect their purpose.

A previously developed model to avoid internal conflict within bureaucracies was examined and then confirmed. The only committees that get down the LHS of this model are those that can authorise, such as company boards, joint ventures and disciplinary committees. This model was recommended for use in checking for governance conflicts in both existing and proposed committees.

Specific changes were recommended to the PRINCE2 governance model regarding correcting the confusion of accountability with responsibility and ceasing to describe committees that cannot authorise activities as boards.

It was also recommended that such committees be established as Project Coordination Groups (PCGs), leaving an existing common acronym in place, with a different middle word.

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