Do steering committees & boards constitute good project governance?

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Summary of findings

- Steering committees are about both collaboration and influencing organisational power
- These competing purposes can confuse their operation
- Many definitions of Governance are vague and perplexing
- Overlooking the key power issue (steering v advising) has perpetuated the confusion
- A model is presented to resolve this

Approach

- Looked at all the academic literature
- Considered Peer reviewed journals only to select out opinion
- Searched multiple data bases for multiple combinations of relevant terms
- Reviewed 1118 titles & abstracts
- Reviewed likely papers & their references
- Selected 29 papers for thematic assessment

Findings

- Earliest mention of steering committee - 1981
- Originated in IT
- Most subsequent study related to IT
- Many found positive effects of steering committees (at program level)
- Some did not and some raised issues with their operation
- Most presumed a universal meaning of governance without specifying it
- Few specified the steering committee role

The power of computing

- The development and proliferation of mainframe computers occurred in the 1950s, 60s and 70s
- The name of and purposes for the steering committee were set by the early 1980s, and have altered little since
- The 1980s saw the dawn of the PC revolution. This put PCs on desks and gave individuals increased organisational power
- The history of the steering committee is concurrent with the rise in personal computing.
- This is unlikely to have been causal. Maintaining IT mainframe influence against the threat to privilege posed by both mainframe non-performance and PCs are more likely causal factors.

What to make of the findings?

Two issues were under-represented:

- Considerations of organisational power and
- How the democratic artifice of a representative committee that votes would integrate with a hierarchically structured organisation

Are steering committees about organisational power?

Organisational Power

Steering committees have been seen as:

- a way to solve a problem by elevating the power of IT in the 1980s (e.g.Nolan 1982)
- A way to get senior management involvement in IT planning (Cobanoglu 2013)

Power & Governance

- Kubernao – to steer (Greek) (Used by Plato)
- Gubernaro – to pilot, govern, manage (Latin)
- Gubernator – helmsman or pilot of a boat, or leader or governor (Latin)
- Organisational governance has been conceptualised as "affecting the way in which (decision making) powers are exercised" (van der Waldt 2010)

What is governance?

- 1992 Cadbury report - system by which companies are directed and controlled (also mentioned accountability)
- This was taken into AS8000 in 2003, with 'company' changed to 'entity', then into IT AS8015 of 2005 and thence into ISO/IEC38500 of 2008.
- van der Waldt 2010 - "the process of decision making and the process by which decisions are implemented"
- Other authors arrange other subjects under its banner – leadership, rationalising, relationships, coordinating.
- One even viewed it as synonymous with management, as "administration, coordinating, appraising, planning. (Sohal & Fitzpatrick 2002)

What is governance?

- Are these extensions legitimate claims of governance? Or

- are they surreptitious measures to influence the powerful or to increase the organisational power of a particular, possibly currently disadvantaged group?

What is governance?

The latter would accord with one of the original purposes of steering committees

- to influence (disrupt or democratise) the authoritarian power structure of the host organisation.

What is governance?

Whatever the motivation,

☐ the low number defining governance of any form, together with

☐ the variation of the definitions offered,

is concerning,

particularly when considered with the fact that

☐ much of the literature that sets out to test the efficacy of steering committees does so without detailing the role of the subject committees.

What does a steering committee do?

Steering committee role & purpose

The academic literature indicates two intertwined motivations for initially bringing steering committees into existence. These were:

- To alter the (autocratic, hierarchical) organisational power structure by introducing a (democratic decision making) process for IT and its users, modelled on the company board of directors.

- To collaborate, gaining the benefit of input from multiple affected sources (stakeholders).

Steering committee role & purpose

Overall, the literature indicates that organisational groups given the name 'steering committee' were intended to:

- bring together important actors
- work cooperatively (collaborate) to
  - understand problems (how to fit information systems with corporate strategy) and
  - generate solutions and
- link the temporary project organisation with the controlling parent organisation.

Steering Committee method of operation

- Few papers considered this issue.
- Most of the early references warned of some of the dangers of steering committees.
- Drury's 1984 note that 'steering' was a generic term that encompassed any committee involved with projects, whether it was actually steering or not, has not been challenged since.
- Drury's 1984 caution on the importance of whether the committee advises or decides has been ignored.

Do steering committees really have the organisational power to decide?

Do steering committees really have the organisational power to decide?

- The issue is really one of how a democratic artefact can be satisfactorily inserted into an organisation that operates hierarchically

- This becomes more complex if more than one steering committee is involved and raises the question as to whether "the more 'governance' we have, the better" is actually true.

How many people do we need to steer?

How much steering do we need?

☐ Could productivity be increased by actually reducing the number of people who think they need to steer, and increasing the number of people who realise they actually need to row?

How much steering do we need?

How can a 'deciding' committee constitute good project governance when it is:

- not legally constituted,
- has no financial delegation or accountability, and
- has responsibilities overlapping with existing organisational roles?

Recommendations

- That advisory committees be labelled 'advisory' rather than 'steering' and
- That committees with' steering' in their name not be given any mandate that overlaps with existing delegated organisational authority
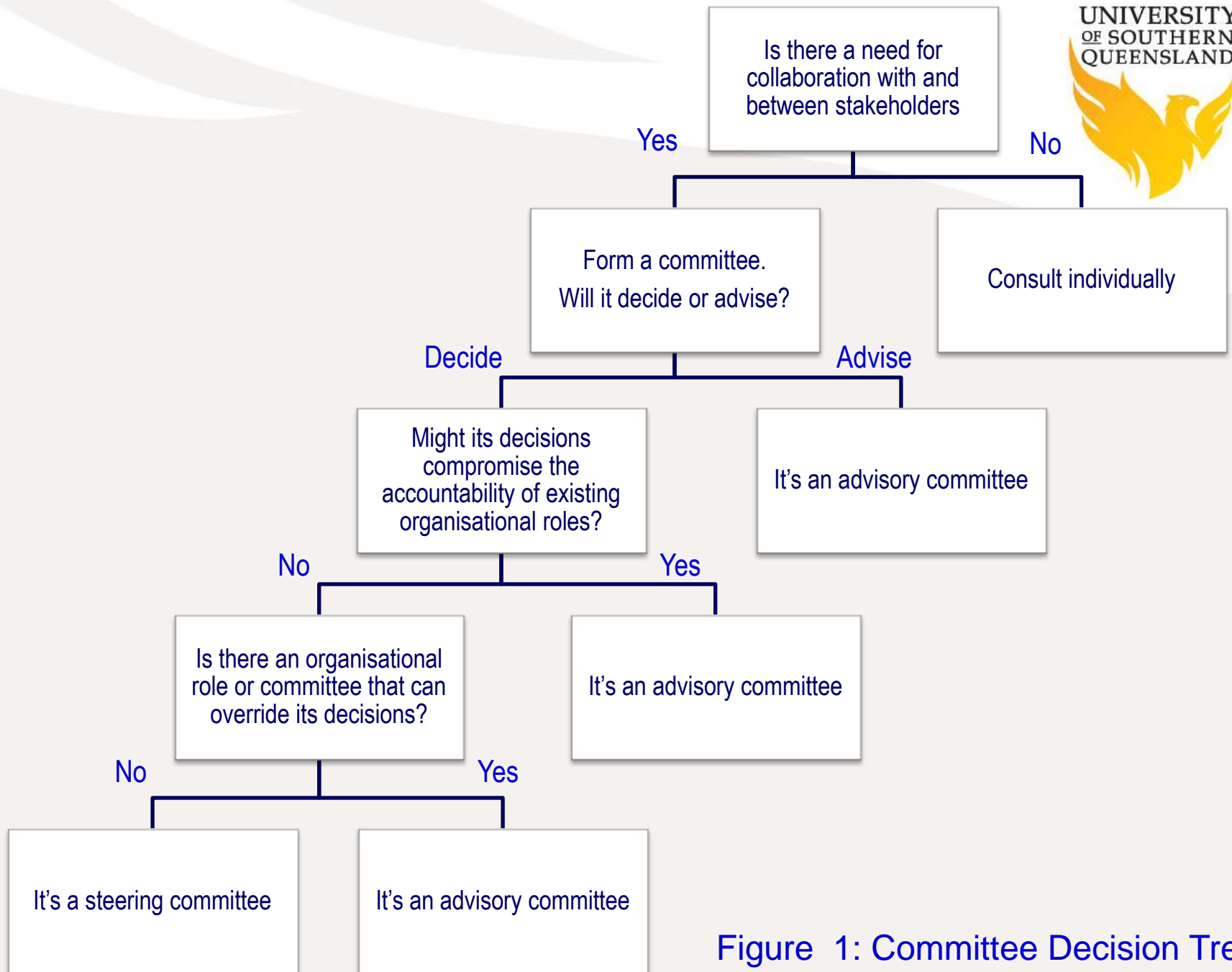- That the above be implemented via the proposed *Committee Decision Tree*.

Figure 1: Committee Decision Tree

Committee decision tree benefits

Reduce steering committee number and increase productivity by:

- Removing the voting and veto potential to frustrate.
- Changing the committee dynamic towards collaboration by labelling a committee 'advisory'.
- Reducing senior executive meeting time - Membership of advisory committees can be delegated.
- Placing the onus back on to project managers to carry out effective stakeholder consultation.
- Conversely, removing the impediment to project managers directly consulting with affected stakeholders.
- Mitigating the tendency to set up a steering committee whenever there's an organisational problem to be solved.

Could a steering committee produce this result?

Further Work

Looking for organisations that:

- have a steering committee that the model indicates should be an advisory committee
- are willing to participate in an action research case study that
- will change that committee to an advisory committee.

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