Summary of reflections on David Hillson's Risk Doctor briefing

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Risk and the ISO31000 Standard

A number of scholars, including myself, have been considering the implications that the relatively recent ISO31000 Standard may have on project management, using a December 2009 briefing by David Hillson, an acknowledged expert on project risk, as the baseline. Specifically, the Hillson (2009) offering was concerned about the way that the ISO had arbitrarily challenged and replaced one of the key definitions in risk management; the definition of risk itself, shifting the emphasis from the 'uncertainty' attached to risk, to the 'effect' of that risk.

This is an important change, in that almost all the previous standards and bodies of knowledge have looked at risk more in terms of the likelihood of it occurring, rather than the effect that it has if and/or when it does occur. Hillson (2009) tabulates these definitions across the various standards, providing a degree of clarity and ease of comparison that brings these issues to the fore in an effective way.

At the journal, we see this as an important issue for project managers, and we were therefore keen to get a number of different perspectives from academics with an interest in the evolution of the literature relating to the project domain. Hopefully, these differing perspectives will be evident as the three contributions —from Roger Atkinson of Bournemouth University in the UK, Anbang Qi of Nankai University in China and myself — will show.

My own reflections, to some extent, consider the inevitability of the new definition from ISO being adopted. I think many of us feel that when a large and influential global standards organisation enters the fray and starts to document process in any area, the likelihood of change being forced upon those who, for one reason or another, need to adopt those standards is high. The ISO is of course keen to 'standardise' the concept of risk (as, indeed, it is attempting to standardise many other areas), although it is evident from the project management literature that the 'one size fits all' approach is untenable. Notwithstanding this, the advantages to an organisation of publishing the accepted standard in an area cannot be underestimated, and we have a perfect example of that in the PM domain with the dominance of the PMI *Body of Knowledge*.

Atkinson touches on the commercial implications of 'owning' an accepted definition, suggesting that this definition can then be franchised to others. He also takes another viewpoint, and applies an element of systems thinking to the consideration of changing definitions, linking in addition to issues of complexity. Atkinson looks at the motivations of ISO's attempt to vary the previously accepted understanding of risk in the project domain, and his view is that the constant

challenging of definitions keeps them relevant and, indeed, that these challenges keep the debate current and fresh.

Qi brings a different perspective, one that is culturally dramatically different from the 'Westernized' ideals of both Atkinson and myself. He considers risk from a different philosophical angle, suggesting that risk and change are interlinked, and that change is inevitable. This leads to, and includes, change in the way that we consider key elements of practice. Traditional Chinese management practices see change as a constant, and tend to be focused on the opportunity that arises from that change, and the ability to manage or govern events around such change for advantage.

Interestingly, all three contributions in this section on Risk focus on change, and the benefits that may accrue or emerge through the effective interaction between change and outcomes. In this respect, maybe organisations like the ISO are creating opportunities for reflection on, and improvement in, PM practice.

We all agree that can only be a good thing.

About the author:
Dr Steve Leybourne is a full-time member of the faculty at Boston University. He has a PhD from Cardiff Business School in the UK, has published papers on project management, change management, and improvised working practices, and has presented at many national and international peer-reviewed conferences, including the US Academy of Management conferences and the PMI Research conferences. He is a recognised thought leader in the area of improvisation, complexity and ambiguity in the project domain. His research interests include organisational improvisation, innovation and the implementation of change using projects. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Project Management Journal* and of the *Journal of Project, Program and Portfolio Management*, and was a member of the UK-based and EPSRC-funded Rethinking Project Management network. He is a member of numerous professional and academic associations, including PMI, and was an invited keynote speaker at the 5th Brazil National PM Conference in 2010.