

What Enables Project Success: Lessons From Aid Relief Projects

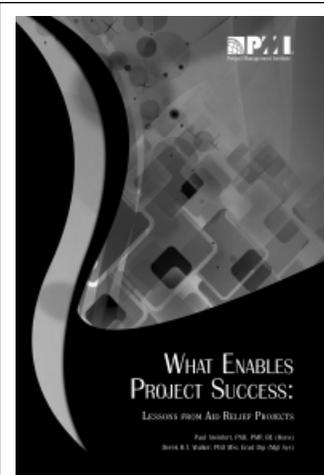
by Paul Steinfort and Derek H. T. Walker

This book, to paraphrase a political writer of some years ago, is research with a human face. In *What Enables Project Success: Lessons From Aid Relief Projects*, Paul Steinfort and Derek H. T. Walker describe not only their research and results, but also how they got there.

At the time of this research, Steinfort was a recent PhD graduate and Walker had been his thesis advisor. Steinfort's PhD thesis plays a central role in the research, and references to his work are frequent, usually made using his first name—hence, the “human face.” While this novel manner of presentation may seem disquieting to academics, it is essential to the story the authors tell.

The authors are both accomplished researchers and experienced practitioners. Because aid relief projects often exhibit a degree of chaos and difficulty not found in more traditional projects—construction, for example—the authors undertook a research effort to determine if and how traditional project management methods might benefit aid relief projects. What they quickly found was surprising: chaos and difficulties are intrinsic to aid relief projects, and the methods applied to deal with them could benefit more traditional projects. Because this was so startling, the authors wisely chose to prepare a report that details both the results and the journey to that end.

The central objective of the book is to explore the antecedents of project management best practice, using aid projects as conceptual frameworks to more fully understand them. Antecedents are things that happen at the front end. In traditional projects, front-end matters are usually well understood, such as *who* (the client) and *what* (the scope and deliverables). Managers of aid projects tend to spend more time on front-end matters because they are not well understood. Cleaning up after a major hurricane involves more than removing debris. It involves restoring physical and social infrastructures with complex linkages of stakeholders, goals, and needs.



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The report's literature review does more than summarize what has been written before. It opens the door to new ways of doing things. Readers will find clear descriptions of new dimensions, characteristics, and success factors of project management. They will encounter the Rethinking Project Management Initiative. And, most important, they will learn about two methods—LogFrame, and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)—that are foreign to traditional project management but have served aid relief projects very well.

The authors' research methodology includes some pretty heady lingo, but things are presented well for easy understanding. They focus on action research, which includes a cycle of reflect, plan, do, and review. This fits the authors' overall view that project managers should be more reflective in their approach, not simple adherents to the plan-and-control paradigm.

Chapter 4, “Research Undertaken,” is the heart of this report and the source of much value. Any amount of time used by readers in assimilating its contents will be time well spent. The authors describe in detail their four-cycle methodology of evaluation, planning, action, and review. They show how they applied “soft system methodology”—a seven-step approach to problem solving that employs “rich pictures” to collect and represent both tangible and intangible information.

The authors close with two chapters: one that summarizes broad research outcomes and one that details specific conclusions. Readers should spend some time with the former and not skip to the latter. One informs the other; both are essential.

Project management is not a settled science, and the Western way is not the only way. This research report was written as a journey of enlightenment. Readers, both in academe and practice, can use it to pry open the door to new and better ways of managing projects in any domain.

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