

# What's wrong with best practice in organisations?

Daniel Thornton



*We see all around us the evidence that science works. For many years there has been an effort to apply scientific thinking to management. In organisations, managers attempt to define and spread 'best practice,' which seems to offer certainty about the correct procedures to follow. In this article I consider why using terms such as best practice is bad practice and suggest an alternative approach which could help to navigate the complexities of organisational life.*

## Keywords

best practice, knowledge, anxiety, complexity, adaptive, technical, agile, waterfall, triangulation, subjective, inter-subjective, objective

## Introduction

Using Google n-gram shows that the expression [best practice](#) became popular from 1910 until 1930, when Taylorism and [scientific management](#) were at their peak. It then went out of fashion until around 1990, when it suffered a revival – and at the same time new expressions including [six sigma](#), [lean management](#), and [process reengineering](#) became popular. When I have been invited to help people address problems in organisations, they have often asked for examples of best practice. No surprise; it often appears on the management consultants' slides, and it is well established in management thinking. Once best practice has been identified, the next step is usually to insist that the whole of an organisation follows it, and so a change management programme is started, with the aim of scaling up the perceived benefits.

## A matter of confidence

Organisations' continued existence depends upon the confidence of employees, suppliers, customers, and creditors. This confidence requires a willing suspension of disbelief through the creation of stories about past and future successes, the excellence of leadership and staff, and the effectiveness of the business model. The less substance to an organisation, the more its employees try to create the impression of solidity – consider the imposing buildings typically occupied by banks. When he reviewed World Bank projects Albert Hirschman found “an understandable tendency to clothe the prospects of all projects in an air of pat certainty” (Adelman: 2013:397). In a similar way, managers use the statement “we follow best practice” to generate confidence in their organisations.

## Masking problems and uncertainty with 'good news' stories

Publicising problems and uncertainty can be bad for business. But so too can ignoring them. The exhaustive [Chilcot](#) inquiry describes how there was insufficient challenge to “mitigate any tendency towards group-think” in the UK’s policy towards Iraq. A “good news culture” also caused problems with the introduction of [Universal Credit](#). The philosopher Quassim Cassam argues that some people’s characters prevent them hearing bad news – they are closed minded. He illustrates this with the example of how, in the approach to the Yom Kippur war in 1973, the head of Israeli military intelligence and his Egypt specialist disregarded evidence that Egypt and Syria were about to attack (Cassam, 2019:28). He is no doubt correct that some people have a greater need for certainty than others, but there is no contradiction between this and noticing a general tendency for hierarchies to filter out bad news. The bigger the organisation, the bigger the gap between the top and the bottom of the hierarchy – and the bigger the problem.

## Managing anxiety

Downplaying uncertainty is one way of trying to manage anxiety. Fear has a known cause, while anxiety is a generalised form of fear which lacks a known cause (Stacey, 2011:345). David Tuckett, who studies decision making, argues that people often react to uncertainty through coping mechanisms which downplay the conflict created by uncertainty (Tuckett, 2011). The organisational theorist Ralph Stacey has written that people create “structures and procedures having the ostensible purpose of enabling some rational task.” These “have little impact on what is actually done” but rather “defend people against the anxiety of feeling uncertain.” (Stacey, Op.Cit.)

## The quest for certainty

Stacey is right that many procedures in organisations do not contribute much to a task but should be seen as rituals with a psychological and social role. In the quote above he is referring to strategy, planning and forecasting, and in the organisations I have been involved in, these have often had little relationship to what actually happens. Nonetheless, it is clear that, in some situations, people can reasonably have more certainty as to what is required and what is likely to happen than in others. The leadership expert Ronald Heifetz compares a patient having heart surgery, which he describes as a technical challenge, with a patient making lifestyle changes to reduce the risk of heart disease, which he describes as an adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 2009). A heart operation can be conducted anywhere in the world using the same procedures with a similar chance of success. In contrast, while a doctor might provide lifestyle advice – eat healthily, stop smoking, exercise more – the patient’s response to this advice is unpredictable, and the patient and doctor will interact in unpredictable ways.

## Technical and adaptive challenges

One organisational response to these different sorts of challenges is to use different approaches to the way [projects](#) are managed.

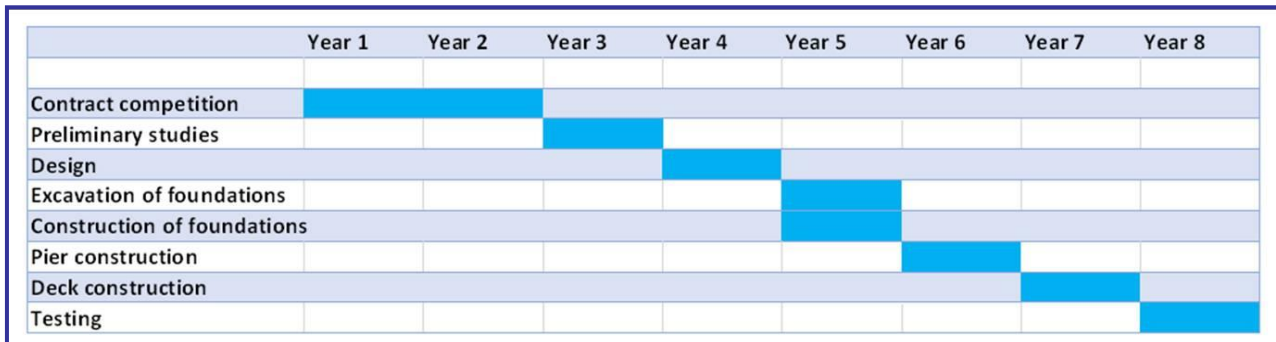


Figure 1: Stylised Gantt representing bridge construction (Daniel Thornton)

Traditional project management takes what is known as a ‘waterfall’ approach – a cascade of tasks performed sequentially, with a series of milestones to track progress. These are often represented in the form of a Gantt chart. Henry Gantt was a contemporary of the creator of scientific management, Frederick Winslow Taylor. But, while the term scientific management has fallen out of fashion (if not the way of thinking), Gantt’s charts remain ubiquitous. Some projects, like building a bridge, need to be managed in phases, with lots of planning at the start. This sort of project can be described as ‘technical’ in Heifetz’s terms, and Gantt charts can be useful for this.

Other sorts of projects need a more adaptive approach. The full extent of what is required cannot be mapped at the outset and be expected to meet a series of milestones. The tasks do not necessarily happen sequentially. Such projects demand a more flexible and responsive – or ‘agile’ – approach. The notions of organisational agility and agile working have become increasingly popular. These draw on lessons from the software industry, where agile project management processes were introduced in response to repeated failures to fix customer requirements at the beginning of projects and develop software that met those requirements. As an alternative, agile approaches encourage rapid cycles of development, testing with users, and adaptation. Users often do not know what they want at the beginning of a project, and developers need to work with users to find out bit by bit. Over recent years, managers in the private sector have begun to recognise that these sort of approaches – and the idea of agile working more broadly – can usefully be applied beyond software to a range of projects. The UK government has similarly [started to introduce the concept into the management of some of its projects](#).

## Problems with best practice

It might seem from the above that best practice can play a useful role; particularly in technical projects, but even in the case of a doctor’s best practice lifestyle advice. However, it remains an unhelpful term, for three reasons. These concern uncertainty about what we know, complex relationships between technical and adaptive approaches, and the uniqueness of each specific context. I develop this argument in the following sections.

## Uncertain knowledge of reality

First, our knowledge of reality is less certain than we like to imagine, even in ostensibly scientific areas. Science is defined as:

*“the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.”*

(OED)

The results of these observations and experiments have obviously changed over time. A proposition might turn out to be wrong (e.g. that the Sun and the planets revolve around the Earth), or to be correct only in certain circumstances (Newtonian physics on the whole works well in everyday life, but quantum mechanics and relativity work better under a wider set of conditions). A scientific proposition therefore represents our best current understanding of a phenomenon, rather than a guide to eternal truths.

This might seem to have little relevance to management practice. Yet even in the natural sciences it is often not possible to be certain what has been reliably established. The practice of independent peer-review should offer some reassurance about journal articles. But science is facing a replication crisis. One study showed that nearly 90% of “peer-reviewed findings in the world’s leading journals from the world’s leading labs did not appear to stand up.” (Blastland, 2019:112) The problem is particularly serious in the sciences of human behaviour, and by extension, in management studies.

This is because many of the questions we are interested in relate to a [complex](#) reality, which is inherently unpredictable. We could call this an ontological problem. At the same time, we have a limited ability to know that reality, which could be called an epistemological problem. On this latter point, the philosopher Simon Blackburn argues that science often does not involve “questions of logical consistency, or...purely mathematical inferences and proofs” but “evaluating interpretations of experiments and observations.” These can be “as open-ended and as subject to judgement and preference as comparable discussions in ethics and morality.” (Blackburn, 2017:97).

None of this is to argue that science does not provide a useful map of reality, or that the scientific method is not the best we have for exploring the natural world. It is not to support anti-vaccine or climate change conspiracy theorists. Rather it is to argue that if the expectation is that science provides certainty, even science is not that scientific. This is particularly true for what some like to call social science, including theories about management.

## A blend of the technical and adaptive

The second reason best practice is a problematic concept is that it implies that it is possible to establish a scientific or technical answer to a situation – whereas in fact there is not a clear bright line between technical and adaptive situations.

In a project to build a bridge, for example, there will be relatively clear cut – even if technically demanding – decisions about how much load a design will bear. But decisions will also be required about whether or not to build a bridge in the first place; and, if so, where. These decisions could involve conflicts of interest, differing views of what's required, contradictory interpretations of the pros and cons, and so on. We cannot know how people will react and what the outcomes might be.



(image: Millau Viaduct, south of France, under construction 2004. Photo by [Mammique](#), GPL)

In the case I cited above of heart surgery as a technical challenge, we can reflect that the operational procedure is interwoven with the adaptive challenges that relate to the fact that the operation was performed by human beings, in an organisational setting. We know, for example, that the chances of success depend in part upon how well the clinical staff are operating as a team (Edmondson, 2012). A similar [pattern](#) has been found for airline safety. If a task has been defined as technical, and best practice has already been defined (and this begs the question, by whom?), the members of the team in the cockpit will not have a voice and might feel inhibited from reacting to unexpected situations.

### **The importance of context**

The third reason the use of the term 'best practice' is problematic is that it carries with it the idea that, once established, it can be applied at all times and in all contexts. That is to say, it is universally applicable. In the complex reality of organisational practice this cannot be the case. Action is – or should be – contingent on the specifics of the context within which it is being applied. Where so-called best practice is judged to offer some guidance on how best to proceed, this always needs translating to suit the circumstances within which it is being applied.

## A possible way forward for OD and management – three varieties of knowledge

Human interactions, with all their unpredictability, form part of even the most technical of projects. Best practice and other scientific approaches to management down play them. What then should our approach be? The philosopher Donald Davidson argued that there are three varieties of knowledge: knowledge of oneself (subjective), knowledge of others' minds (inter-subjective) and knowledge of the world (objective) (Davidson, 2001). While for some philosophers one form of knowledge provides the foundations for others, for Davidson the three varieties depend upon each other, and we triangulate between them, just as a navigator uses two known locations to find a third. Meaning emerges from triangulation, not from discovering 'facts' about the world.

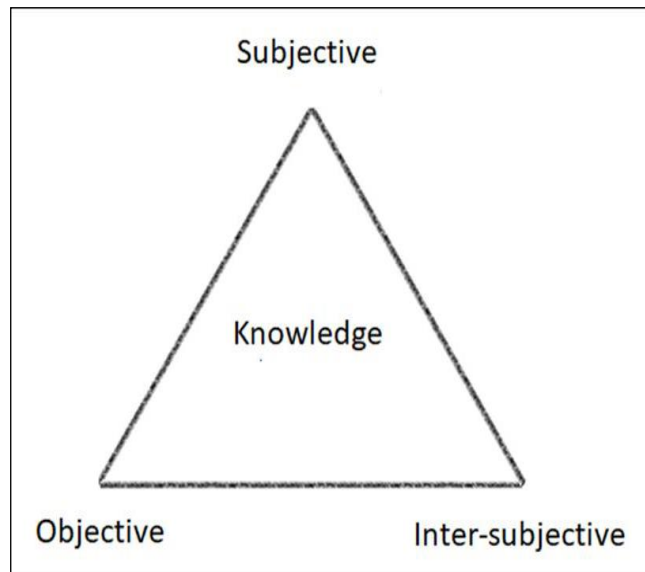


Figure 2: Triangulated knowledge (after Davidson 2001)

So far, so good – but what has this got to do with management? For me the three varieties highlight the importance of each individual's perspective, of developing a shared perspective and language with others, and of establishing as much as possible objectively (or technically, or scientifically). The tendency in management is to exaggerate the scope for objective knowledge – thereby managing anxiety – and to disregard the others, but each of the three varieties of knowledge deserve attention.

Individuals need the chance to speak and be heard, while recognising the risks of closed-mindedness and other vices of the mind in ourselves and in others (Cassam, op.cit). The limits to inter-subjective knowledge, which is our knowledge of others' minds, mean that – as Davidson put it – “communication is always incomplete” (Lepore, 1988:20). Although we can be reasonably confident that we have shared understandings of everyday objects, the same cannot be said of terms which are frequently heard in organisations such as ‘change management.’ If practices are proposed to govern the behaviour of a group, continuous work is needed to make it more likely that there is a shared understanding of those practices. This work cannot be assumed away. Finally, while there is not a hard distinction between technical and adaptive challenges, we can have more objective knowledge in some domains than in others. Practices cannot be reliably established as “best” regardless of context, but they can be informed by objective knowledge. Even when our maps are “incomplete or partial, they may still be better than others. And even when truth veils herself, falsity can be detected for what it is” (Blackburn, op.cit.:117). Organisational life is a continuous process and the idea of triangulation provides a metaphor for the need to be continuously iterating between our own perspectives, others' perspectives, and what we can reliably establish about the world.

Triangulation does not offer the comforting certainties of best practice. Rather it recognises that uncertainty needs to be struggled with. As the pragmatic philosopher C.S. Pierce put it:

*“enquiry is not standing upon the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the present. Here I will stay until it begins to give way.”*

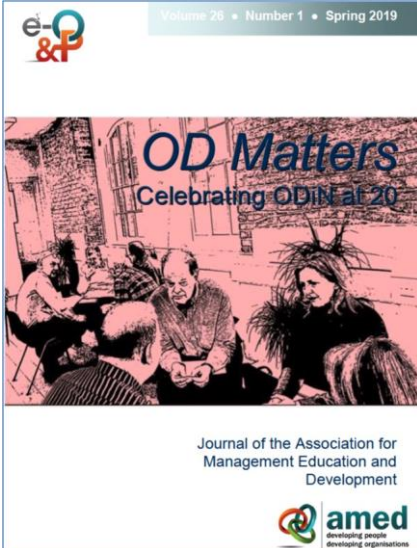
(Blackburn, op. cit. 40)

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**Daniel** has spent much of his career as a civil servant in a range of roles across Whitehall, including at the Treasury and No10. He then worked on change initiatives at Gavi, which funds immunisation in developing countries, and at the Institute for Government, where he advised government departments on their organisational improvement programmes. He is now working for an education charity and can be contacted at: <https://twitter.com/DanOnGov> or <https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniel-thornton-88948a21/>



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