

KEYWORDS ■ Stakeholder management ■ Organizational politics ■ Collective competence
■ Project management

EXPLORING COLLECTIVE POLITICAL COMPETENCE

IN SOCIALLY COMPLEX PROJECTS

✉ **Christophe Leyrie, D. Sc.**

LemGP – Université du
Québec à Chicoutimi
christophe_leyrie@uqac.ca

✉ A B S T R A C T

The involvement of many interdependent actors in projects, each with different, or even divergent, interests, creates a level of complexity that is challenging researchers and professionals alike. The aim of the exploratory research presented here is to contribute to an improved understanding of how managers can facilitate efficient operation and success for very socially complex projects. Based on the political perspective of organizations and on specific literature on the concept of competence, this research specifically focused on exploring the relevance of considering the political management of project stakeholders or project actors to be a collective competence. Results seem to support this hypothesis by providing initial confirmation of the existence of actual collective political competence, and by describing, for the first time, the contours of projects involving many participants. These results also support a more widespread theory of leadership and a more authentic approach to stakeholder management in projects as performance factors. They have also made it possible to suggest areas that would benefit from further research.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of dealing with projects in terms of their complexity is now obvious, both for practitioners looking to deal with this complexity and for researchers looking to explain it. There have been several efforts to develop this concept over the past few years and the initial idea, primarily based on a structural approach, has progressively expanded to include other approaches such as uncertainty, change, rhythm or speed in addition to sociopolitical contexts (Gerald, Maylor et al. 2011). It was in relation to the latter concept, originating from a strong (Svejvig and Andersen, 2015), albeit recent, research stream, that Ger-

aldi and Adlbrecht (2007) noted that interaction complexity is now the main component of project complexity.

Analyzing specific and complex social contexts makes it possible to understand how specific competences could be necessary for projects to succeed. However, although most authors and practitioners recognize the importance of being able to wield the necessary influence within and outside areas of formal authority in order to help align differing interests, obtaining the necessary resources and building support networks and alliances (Peled 2000, Bourne and Walker 2005), it must be noted that managers start from a position of weakness and that few solutions to this issue have been proposed in the literature (Morris and Pinto 2011, Klein 2012). In addition to the theoretical and standardized publications which describe the political nature of these projects and their corresponding management strategies, the few empirical studies that do exist seem less concerned with the characteristics of these competences than with their links to performance. Furthermore, when not limited to an almost anecdotal level, most research into this subject is focused on the framework of relationships within a project, or even an organization, while excluding external participants, despite the fact that the latter are often recognized as having a significant impact on whether or not a project achieves its goals.

This article proposes to report on the results of an exploratory empirical research project in order to contribute to an improved understanding of how managers can facilitate success for very socially complex projects. More specifically, using the political perspective of organizations and of recent work focusing on competence management made it possible to look into the relevance of considering the political management of project actors or stakeholders

to be a collective competence. After discussing specific scientific research into these issues and briefly explaining the methodology used, we will present the analysis on which the discussion is based, linking this to political competence within projects with complex social contexts.

1. Social complexity and projects

Social complexity can be described as the complexity of interactions caused by the number of interfaces between project systems and their external environment, as well as between project subsystems. To achieve their aims and targets, projects must remain integrated, coherent and consistent with the environment in which they are based. Project systems are therefore characterized by the coexistence of uncertainty and disorder, created by the participants involved, with the order needed for the project to progressively achieve its aims. The complexity of the order/disorder/organization relationship described by Morin (1990, p.85) is expressed clearly: in some circumstances, disordered phenomena are needed to create organized phenomena, which in turn contribute to the growth of order. According to a definition provided by Riveline (1991), to differing degrees, project participants must deal with complexity of abundance, quantitative in nature, and complexity of meaning, qualitative in nature, depending on the situation. Complexity is expressed by the high number of solutions or options that could possibly be used to achieve the goals expected by all project participants, although their exploration is limited due to constraints, by the existence of various strong and antagonistic perceptions or opinions of the

choices, or by both of these. According to Morin (1990), these complex situations can be understood by applying three principles. The first of these is dialogical, translating the coexistence of various, and sometimes opposing, rationales, such as order and disorder. The second is a principle of organizational recursion, which uses finality and self-organization to express adjustment and environmental adaptation. Finally, there is a hologramatic principle, in which the part is in the whole and the whole is in the part. Thus, the profusion of rationales creates a confrontation between participants, which contributes to the development of complex phenomena, such as projects, where results depend on the balance of power, alliances and their reversal, and any resulting synergy and antagonism (Smida 2008).

The social complexity created by an “exponentially” increasing number of participants (Frame 2002) as well as by the scope, variety, range and subtlety of their social behavior (Byrne 1996) is therefore typical in projects. In turn, the proliferation of projects has resulted in adapted management capacities and strategies (Hawkins and Rajagopal 2005) as well as stronger project leadership (Winter, Smith et al. 2006). Within this context, managing social complexity, and specifically politically managing stakeholders, becomes a key competence, a potential source of real value and performance gains (Klein 2012). Surrounded by a network of interests, project managers must create conditions that encourage relationships and cooperation, whether direct or indirect, with and between the various and multiple internal and external stakeholders (Aaltonen, Jaakko et al. 2008). For most members of an organization it is no longer enough to plan and integrate contributions from various experts in a more or less sequential manner (Garel, 2003). Instead, transverse groups should be

developed to include internal and external participants with differing and complementary skills (Picq, 2008). Within this context, the need for these interests to converge, a combinatorial characteristic of projects (Giard and Midler 1997), contributes to making the former a significant battleground for power (Declerck, Eymery et al. 1980) and exposes the primarily political nature of the situation (Pinto 1998).

2. Political behavior and competences within organizations

The work of March, Simon and Cyert (1970, 1978, 1991) on the concept of “bounded rationality” in the decision-making process was among the first to show the relevance of seeing organizations as political entities (Bagla-Gökalp, 1998, Hatch 2000). These authors question whether participants are capable and likely to follow a completely rational decision-making process. They also highlight the importance of context and of the decision-makers themselves due to their individual strategies. From this point of view, a “real organization” is created (Martinet 1984, p.36) from the choices made by organizational participants, based on what Crozier and Friedberg (1977) identified as the margin of freedom available to these participants. For the authors, who introduce the key concept of participant strategy, individuals inside an organization choose opportunities within individual constraints, which makes their behavior imprecise and haphazard. They believe (1977) that organization and action create the same problem, “cooperation and interdependence between participants pursuing differing, if not contradictory, interests” (p.18). Collective action therefore takes the form of cooperation or alliances in order to resolve problems with vague solutions. This uncertainty, presented as a fundamental resource during negotiations, opens the way for relationships based on dependency and power.

This political approach by organizations has produced two major research streams (Morgan 1989): organizations as a system of government and organizations as a system of political activity. The existence of the specific phenomenon of political behavior is found within this context, focused on the daily dynamics within the “political arena” that is an organization (Mintzberg 1985). It is generally accepted that the latter occurs to a varying degree in all organizations and that it can be described in non-evaluative terms (Mayes and Allen 1977). However, beyond a certain consensus on these points, it is clear that, despite the increasingly wide-ranging body of work and although these behaviors would seem to benefit from a common understanding, no other consensual description has emerged. Among the many approaches and definitions, it seems that the daily expression of politics within an organization is seen by many as the use of power or influence in order to promote individual or group interests within a context of uncertainty or disagreement

(Kacmar and Baron 1999). An additional difficulty is that although the idea of politics often falls alongside that of influence and/or power, no expression of the links between these three constructs has yet been unanimously agreed upon or even described. Conscious of the fact that it seems difficult to assimilate influence and power, but that these ideas are nevertheless intimately linked, we note, along with Kipnis et al. (1980), that power is used to influence. From this perspective, and in accordance with the proposal of Madison et al. (1980), we believe political behavior to be a part of the process of influence while power is the potential reservoir of this influence. According to this interpretation, any political phenomenon will therefore imply both influence and power, with the former being the active display of the latter. In order to analyze political behavior, it is necessary to confirm the existence of intentionality by the initiator of the behavior and the contentious, or potentially contentious, nature of the situation, as well as the presence of a process of influence realized by power. It is within a contentious framework, whether actual, potential or perceived as such, that influence and power can be combined to create political behavior, once intentionality has been established and force and coercion excluded.

Political activity is, therefore, inherent in any work group and managers must deal with it or become one of its central participants. Managers are a source of political behavior but they are also a target for such behavior from their subordinates, peers and superiors. Thus, skillful politicians are found to be a facet of the competence required for action (Harel Giasson 1993). In the political arena of an organization, where participants are meant to have a basic ability to initiate political behavior, the simple fact of intending to display or actively displaying such behavior is not enough to prejudice skillful politicians against the initiators of the behavior (Ferris, Fedor et al. 1994). Indeed, while activating power can facilitate short-term success, the lack of skillful politicians in this behavioral context often seems to lead to medium-term failure (Treadway, Hochwater et al. 2005). In addition to the “what”, i.e., political behavior, the “how” needs to be defined to make it possible to highlight the quality and effectiveness of a participant in action. As important as it is, this distinction has long been ignored by theorists and researchers who, until recently, generally assumed that behavior was synonymous with its own effectiveness (Ferris, Fedor et al. 1994). However, beyond the process of influence, which is in itself a political behavior rather than the manifestation of political skill, it is in the conditions of implementation for the behavior and ultimately, in the achievement of targeted aims, that the political skill or competence of the instigator will be judged. The latter must be able to bring another individual to their point of view without alienating them, in spite of the fact that the situation may be confrontational or perceived as such. This means that the targeted individual must react positively to the attempt to influence them and that they must do so within their margin of freedom. The essence of a skillful politician is their

ability to influence others at work using persuasion, as well as their ability to coordinate support while inspiring trust (Ferris, Davidson et al. 2005). In summary, if politics within an organization is the art of intentionally using power to influence outcomes within a conflict situation, whether real, potential or perceived, then we believe that political skill or competence¹, a specific social skill (Ferris, Perrewé et al. 2006), is represented by the ability to use power capital to achieve the desired results without using up social capital.

3. Individual and collective competence

As noted by Martineau (2006), there are many different definitions for competence. Among these, Le Boterf (2000) approached competence as a process and observed agents of competence in action. He described these people as capable of weaving relevant links between resources to manage professional situations and performance targets. Having access to resources (knowledge, know-how, reasoning, etc.) is necessary but not sufficient for a person to act with competence. For this, they must combine and use a set of appropriate resources and implement a professional practice known as a “rollout” (p. 29) of decisions, actions and interactions to complete a specific activity or resolve a problematic situation. Based on this work, (Le Boterf 2008), we concluded that for a professional to act with competence, they must implement the relevant professional practice to effectively manage a situation and that within this practice, they must use an appropriate combination of resources.

Le Boterf (2006) has also raised the question of whether it is necessary to link individual competence to collective competence. As with other researchers (Martineau 2006), he notes the increasing dependence of organizational performance on collective work. In doing so, he touches on the importance of interfaces in producing added value and the complexity of professional situations due to interdisciplinarity as well as the conciliation needed between individual, and even contradictory, strategies (p. 189), characteristics already mentioned in relation to the context of projects and organizational politics. The question is whether it is possible for these issues to be highlighted by a simple juxtaposition of individual competences or even whether the simple act of creating a team is enough for it to be collectively competent (Bataille 2001). The search for answers to these questions is behind the recent surge in interest in the concept of collective competence, although a commonly accepted definition has not been achieved. From among the many existing definitions, we chose to view collective competence as the operational knowledge specific to a group that allows that group

to achieve performance that would not have been achievable by individuals alone or that is greater than the simple sum of individual competences (Retour and Krohmer 2006). In addition, and as highlighted by Picq (2008), characteristics already attributed to individual competences will also be attributed to collective competences. The author makes particular reference to competences that are observable and that develop as part of an action, within the framework of a situation or specific problem, and that are the result of complex combinations.

From the available definitions, it is, therefore, clear that collective competence exceeds that which is created by simply adding individual competences together and that it transcends these and provides additional elements (Retour 2005). In order to create an operational idea and to be able to evaluate any occurrences within an organization, Retour and Krohmer (2006) identified four consecutive attributes for collective competence, which include: a common frame of reference, particularly with relation to the end result and the methods used; a shared language to minimize transaction costs for participants; collective memory; and subjective engagement, making it possible to retain personal autonomy within the group. In addition, it should be noted that many authors have found collective competence at a group level, an individual level, an organizational level (Krohmer 2004), and more recently, an interorganizational level (Retour, Picq et al. 2009).

Furthermore, it is important to highlight the closeness between the notion of collective competence and of projects. By their nature, projects require coordinated intervention by various specialists in order to achieve a common goal. They involve cooperation of participants and, therefore, exist due to collective action. However, collective competences emerge and build themselves within collective action, which has led several authors to combine the two concepts. For Amherdt et al. (2000, p. 32), for example, interdependence is both the starting point for motivating project teams and the point at which collective competences start to emerge, meaning that project management itself is an expression of collective competence. For Dupuich-Rabasse (2007, p. 57), it is important to consider project management as a collective competence adapted to professionals who know how to work together, cooperate and ensure they do not offend each other.

As projects are opened up, with managers needing to manage within increasingly complex ecosystems made up of many and diverse participants and stakeholders, the question of how they create favorable conditions for their project to progress and be successful needs to be answered. Following this literature search into the political approach of organizations and the concept of collective competence, we believe that more detailed research into the appropriateness of considering the political management of project participants or stakeholders to be a collective competence in socially complex projects is needed.

¹ It should be specified that the literature discussed previously, French as well as North American, has led us to use the term “skill” and “competence” interchangeably. While French authors mainly use the latter term, English texts use both “skills” and “competence” to describe similar, and even identical, phenomena.

4. Methodology

As our research took a political view when observing the interaction processes implemented in projects, and as this perspective inherently highlights the motivation, interest and strategies of participants, we believed that a qualitative interpretative approach was best. As this perspective inherently highlights the motivation, interest and strategies of participants, we believed that a qualitative interpretative approach was best. Using such an approach to study complex phenomena is fully justified (*Pires 1997*), as are other approaches linked to organizational politics (*Fischer 2004*). Qualitative research is particularly interpretative and adapted to analyzing rationales for action and social practice (*Mucchielli 2009*).

The questions on which this research is based would seem to benefit from a practical methodology which observes the way in which managers create a favorable environment for project progress with their stakeholders. Investigating a process by studying strategies, the resulting behaviors and the competences that underpin them within a specific context, implies that the way in which the events are experienced and their meaning for those involved is of interest. Within a project context, the relationship framework between managers and the various project participants or stakeholders is an obvious context in which to study actual and contextual practices that could reveal and portray the phenomena being studied.

From a more operational perspective, two rather inductive phases were observed. The initial phase comprised non-directed interviews and was wide-ranging to validate the subject and provide initial ideas for exploration. We selected and analyzed a varied theoretical sample using open coding and comparison to tease out an initial hypothesis on the nature of competences as well as to identify relevant cases for the following phase. Critical incident techniques (*Flanagan 1954*) were used to maintain a delicate balance, allowing data to emerge while ensuring questions remained sufficiently focused. Nineteen managers from five different companies responsible for projects with budgets ranging from a few million dollars to tens of millions of dollars were interviewed for between 75 and 120 minutes.

The preliminary phase was used to validate our questions and focus the next phase of the investigation with relation to proposals arising from an analysis of the exploratory data. The second, in-depth phase then aimed to verify the preliminary issues and investigate them more closely. Given the nature of the aims, questions and epistemological position of this project, we decided that the second phase of the investigation would closely examine situations in which relationships between project stakeholders were revealed. Case studies seemed the most relevant choice as they offered the advantage of providing a situation in which it was possible to

observe the interplay between a large number of interaction issues which would, therefore, make it possible to do justice to the complexity and richness of these social situations (*Mucchielli 2009*). To this end, but with the aim of remaining focused on the research questions while increasing the angles of approach or units of analysis, we chose a design involving two embedded case studies. An embedded design makes it possible to focus on sub-units, or incidents within the cases, in contrast to a holistic design which focuses only on a main unit (*Yin, 2009*). The analysis strategy adopted was based on the principle of replication (*Yin, 2009*) and made it possible to question individuals, cases and inter-case statements before looking at the study as a whole overall and its implications with relation to the questions raised. **Table 1** describes the main characteristics of the projects selected for the case studies².

5. Results of the empirical study and discussion

Based on questions asked in the first phase, we subsequently focused on professional managerial practices during significant or critical moments in relationships with project stakeholders. It was possible to note immediately that within this framework, there were repeated and explicitly designed strategies of influence currently defined as “political” by the managers themselves. The description of these specific courses of action or behaviors made it possible to identify several levels of interrelated competences which allowed an instigator or agent to effectively manage specific professional situations.

Individual political competence

At an individual level, all the managers questioned described how they implemented various strategies for interpersonal influence, how they created and made use of networks and how they were able to exploit various communication channels in order to develop harmonious relationships with other participants. These strategies all conform to the work by Ferris and his colleagues who proposed and validated a multidimensional conceptualization of political competence in organizations. They described this as the capacity to effectively understand others at work and to use this knowledge to influence them to act in such a way as to promote their personal aims and/or organizational targets (*Ferris, Treadway et al. 2005*).

Therefore, an awareness of others displayed by recognizing and understanding the different rationales present and the resulting relational dynamics, as well as an awareness of self within a social context expressed by recognizing one’s

² As the studies involved confidentiality agreements, it is impossible to specifically identify the projects, companies or participants involved.

own position and limitations, recall the social insight described by the Ferris group (*2007*). For the authors, this dimension of political competence within an organization corresponds to an ability to observe others closely, while understanding social interactions and correctly interpreting personal behavior as well as that of others. Furthermore, initiating and developing relationships with a variety of participants and then using these contacts to create networks and alliances to protect and advance projects bring to mind networking capabilities specifically described as the implementation and use of different networks, alliances and other groups of people containing resources needed to achieve personal and organizational resources (*Ferris, Treadway et al. 2007*). In addition, and with the declared aim of achieving their goals, managers showed a clear tendency to implement strategies of influence that were differentiated and adapted not only to the various situations encountered but also to the different participants involved in these situations. These strategies are summarized in **Table 2** below. In some situations, managers also clearly demonstrated the perspective needed to examine the results of implementing their strategies and to identify alternatives where necessary. For Ferris et al. (*2007*), one of the key components of political competence in organizations is a convincing personal style, making it possible to exert a strong personal sphere of influence, combined with flexibility, to adapt and configure

personal behavior so that others react in the desired manner. Finally, the interviews showed that maintaining a clearly positive attitude toward stakeholders from the start and involving them emotionally in the project are completely in line with the final aspect of political competence of apparent sincerity, as described by Ferris et al. (*2007*). Indeed, according to the authors, politically competent individuals are, or appear to be, upstanding, authentic and sincere. This allows them to inspire trust and be more effective in their attempts to influence than if they were perceived to be authoritarian and manipulative. These elements, initially identified during the exploratory interviews and confirmed during analysis of the case studies, seem to imply that the individual political competence of project managers is demonstrated in specific situations by their ability to use and combine different resources in order to act and interact with participants and stakeholders to influence them to promote the aims of the project in an atmosphere of mutual respect and good faith.

Organizational political competence

The qualitative methodology selected for this study is particularly justified by the desire to observe examples of political competence “in context”. From the initial phase of interviews, this expanded vision made it possible to note the recurring involvement of organizational elements in the displays

of political competence among managers and, therefore, in activating resources needed to implement effective courses of action within this framework. Data provided by the case studies made it possible to examine in more detail the elements making up political competence at an organizational level. We will provide an initial description here.

Firstly, it is important to remember that political competence is a social and relational competence and that the behaviors that embody it can only be deployed with relation to others. This clarification highlights the need for the agent of political competence to create a direct or indirect relationship with other participants involved in the action being developed or the problem being resolved. Organizational context can make a difference. Firstly, in a relatively restricted, explicit and deliberate manner, it can provide spaces for contact or interaction between project stakeholders. As we have seen, this creates a formalized project cycle which includes elements that are necessarily open to stakeholders, such as project reviews, value analysis sessions and risk evaluations. These create a forum in which interests and forces can be discussed. The various procedures focused on the technical management of projects can also allow managers to implement certain political courses of action with relation to these stakeholders.

Context can also contribute to the deployment of behaviors linked to individual political competence by

TABLE 1.Characteristics of projects selected for case study

	Project 1	Project 2
Aim of the project	Installing a cooling system	Stadium expansion
Type of project	Industrial engineering	Civil engineering
Manager	Internally managed	External package
Status of completion	Completed – Delivered	Completed
Budget	17.6 million dollars	30 million dollars
Deadline	16 months	22 months
Stakeholders	Over 15 stakeholders not including the project manager and project team	Over 15 stakeholders not including the project manager and project team

explicitly recognizing the relevance for managers to allocate organizational resources – time or money – to the development and maintenance of stakeholder relationships. For example, we were able to note that in some organizations, all efforts needed to develop close relationships with stakeholders were not only explicitly recognized but formally supported within the project by an appropriate budget. Similarly, a relatively formalized collection of routines involving members of the senior management team in negotiation or influence activities led by project managers can be an important organizational resource. Several practices were used in these situations, including intervention at the highest level of the organization to unblock a situation and the participation of members of the senior management team in negotiation meetings with an agreed distribution of roles according to a predetermined scenario.

Another form of involvement arises when teams are created by senior management or through human resource allocation while the project is ongoing. In both of these situations, the level of political sensitivity or awareness displayed by decision-makers when choosing people can affect the subsequent ability of managers to implement effective courses of action. We were, therefore, able to verify how much care was taken by senior management - sometimes with help from managers themselves - in these selections, going beyond technical competence to take into account the relationship history, the existence of current or previous conflicts and the nature of the balance of power between the individuals involved, including clients. A technically powerful team that is also politically compatible would be more likely to succeed in any influential endeavors toward other stakeholders.

Finally, we observed several instances where a similar state of mind with in relation to stakeholders, alongside a similar understanding of the relationship models that should be adopted with

the stakeholders, with particular reference to the balance of power and exercising influence, was shared between members of an organization. This common heritage built-in, maintained and transmitted through organizational hierarchy makes it possible to create a political culture and, therefore, to provide a referential framework for managers and other members of the organization when defining and implementing relationship strategies. We were struck by the coherent manner in which perspectives and politically motivated operational schemes were described by several managers within the same organization, and by the importance this coherence was given in their discussions.

Organizations can, therefore, demonstrate their sensitivity to the political nature of project ecosystems by creating conditions to encourage expression as well as integrating individual political competence. In this respect, organizations pool sustainable know-how that is brought out by specific mechanisms as well as the existence of a largely shared political culture. The organizational aspects described in this article - inciting interactions, influence routines, team make-up and political culture - are a response to recent work on the various levels of competence within a project context (*Retour, Picq et al. 2009*). As far as we know, these aspects have not been linked to political competences within organizations or projects. Therefore, based on these aspects, we suggest that the political competence of an organization is displayed by its ability to act on the internal project environment to achieve maximum benefit from the individual political competences involved.

Interorganizational political competence

In conjunction with our observation of political competences “in context”, we decided to take the increasingly important field of external project participants into account and, as a result,

the existing relationships with and between these participants. This primarily applies to individuals and organizations not within a hierarchy under direct control of the organization, but who are often significant contributors to projects and who may be involved in a broader wider team. Data analysis clearly shows that the increasing flexibility of organizational boundaries is directly reflected in influential relationships within projects that are evolving from a traditionally unidirectional framework to becoming multidirectional. Managers must not only use their influence outside the organization and the formal and defined hierarchical relations; they must also deal with external influences.

The first element can be found in the mutual understanding of various environments that is developed by stakeholders. It is a type of interorganizational social insight which implies that there is a political understanding of the project context and the situation in which all participants find themselves within the organization and the project as well as within stakeholder organizations. For example, each will have a good knowledge of the balance of power in the other organizations involved, particularly where this could have a direct or indirect impact on the project. In turn, understanding the relationship challenges that exist outside the project will make it possible to act on specific situations and to combine and integrate stakeholders in actions and interactions involving third parties. For example, we noted how it was possible for project managers to change some participants assigned by partner companies in order to make teams conform better to the project context or to ensure that all individuals involved were compatible. Another example is how participants from different organizations, having noticed that some of their interests coincided, came together to combine their efforts in order to affect decisions made by the project promoter. While there are some parallels with the organization level, this level of political competence nevertheless differs in the reciprocity of its scope between internal and external bodies. Within the framework of influential relationships between stakeholders, it is necessary to choose, mobilize and combine resources distributed outside a manager’s traditional sphere of influence. To our knowledge, this level has never been discussed in conjunction with the political competence of managers, although it echoes some work in the field of human resource management (*Retour, Picq, et al. 2009*). For example, Picq and Defélix (2011) recently raised the question of competence management in the context of an extended com-

pany or partner organizations where, according to the authors, success is based on an ability to pool and share competences. Therefore, based on these aspects, we suggest that inter-organizational political competence is displayed by the ability of several organizations to act on an external project environment to achieve maximum benefit from the individual political competences involved.

Collective political competence

All of these elements suggest that political competence in projects could not only be based on the individual characteristics of managers, but also on organizational and inter-organizational factors. As has been mentioned previously, while individual competences allow stakeholders to be influenced to promote project aims, political competence at an organizational and inter-organizational level makes it possible to create a favorable context within and outside the organization to achieve maximum benefit from the competence. Therefore, project managers need more than certain specific characteristics to be able to deal with stakeholders effectively. This makes it possible to confirm the relevance of approaching political competence in projects as a collective rather than individual competence, as is generally the case.

Examining the data made it possible to support this hypothesis by pinpointing several elements typical of this type of competence. Firstly, regardless of the critical incident analyzed, organizational and/or inter-organizational elements are always used when respondents implement an influential action. Moreover, the effect is not cumulative but rather a combination or composition effect. Organizational and inter-organizational resources are combined with individual competences to create a collective competence that is greater than what a manager alone would have achieved. Individual political competences, particularly those of project managers, will always be at the heart of strategies of influence, although each incident clearly showed that the full effects of this type of strategy are only expressed if the strategy is collectively approved. The peculiarities of the political competence that we have described are due to the combined and procedural nature generally retained in research to define an idea (*Le Boterf, 2006*). The concept of shared aims and collective processes that result in an ability to deal with certain situations or problems with improved effectiveness (*Dupuich-Rabasse 2007*) is also clearly obvious.

In addition, we also observed several attributes of collective competence as identified by Retour

TABLE 2. Summary of strategies of influence

Direct pressure: Exerting varying levels of pressure on a target using a variety of levers: relatively firm messages transmitted verbally or in writing, privately or publicly
Confrontation: Direct confrontation with a target, whether in public or private, about an issue causing disagreement
Negotiation: Exchanging concessions or retreating from certain demands made by a target in order to obtain concessions on issues considered to be important in return
Rational persuasion: Using rational/technical arguments to justify actions/decisions to targets
Building an alliance: Mobilizing and involving internal and external participants in order to increase the pressure exerted by the project leader on a target as part of an active or reactive strategy
Using a network: Involving one or more members of a network of contacts so that they exert the required pressure on a target as part of an active or reactive strategy

and Krohmer (2006). For example, cooperation, an indicator of collective competences for some authors (Krohmer, 2004) and the key to these competences for others (Dubois & Retour 1999), was repeatedly described by managers with relation to technical aspects of their projects as well as within the framework of strategies deployed in their relationships with project participants. It was also noted that managers and some projects participants engage subjectively, another recognized characteristic of collective competence. The recurring trend for managers and some participants to create informal communication channels in parallel to formal channels and hierarchical lines, is a demonstration of decision-making or collective initiatives, and their resulting responsibilities. The importance of common understanding and shared procedures and targets for actions of influence was also noted. This understanding is built collectively by participants from their individual positions and political competences. It refers back to a common reference, a recognized characteristic of collective competence, which is defined collectively and makes it possible to establish a short-lived community of aims and a harmony of actions (Retour & Krohmer, 2006).

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, the analysis of these various elements, extracted during exploratory interviews and case studies, revealed that within a project, collective political competence is demonstrated by the repeated ability of a group to mobilize and combine individual, organizational and inter-organizational resources in order to act and interact with stakeholders to persuade them to promote project aims in such a way as to satisfy the majority. This competence is led by project managers and their teams along with some other

project contributors, both internal and external. Rather than a project team in the strictest sense, we are, therefore, referring to a group which coalesces during action, emerging from voluntary intersubjective links which cannot be defined in advance or externally (Leclerc 1999, p. 20). Looking again at elements of the Kouabenan and Dubois classification (2000), this politically competent project group gains legitimacy inside and outside the organization by involving participants from outside the project as well as the organization, with relation to situations and problems. Depending on the context, this is demonstrated by actions of influence implemented simultaneously or sequentially, together or separately, for as long as the project lasts.

The effects of collective political competence

Still linked to the initial interviews, we finally chose to observe the consequences of deploying and using these strategies and competences during a project. Many definitions of competence make direct reference to performance (Picq, 2008). To verify whether a person is more or less competent, it is relevant to look at the results of their professional practices in situations (Le Boterf, 2008). Similarly, it can be expected that collective competence is expressed as the ability to collectively resolve problems leading to effectiveness (Bataille, 2001). Within the specific context of collective political competence within projects that was used during this research and according to the descriptions proposed previously, effectiveness or performance corresponds to the promotion of project aims in a way that satisfies the largest number of stakeholders during disputes

and conflicts. From a more operational perspective, we believe that the success of the project it should be expressed by achieving key targets as modeled by the time-cost-quality triangle and the explicit satisfaction of stakeholders. Therefore, it is from this perspective that we chose to analyze the consequences of implementing political strategies and behaviors.

Generally, the collective cooperation and commitment observed as part of the influence deployed during projects had a direct influence in stopping slowdowns or blockages, key challenges in the scenarios studied. This clearly contributed to the final production of deliverables with relation to defined objectives. However, the competence displayed during these incidents also made it possible to take into account specific interests and issues raised by participants involved. This made it possible to avoid creating new short- to medium-term threats while the projects were ongoing as well as ensuring the satisfaction of most stakeholders by the end of the project. Within the socially complex projects being studied, collective political competence was, therefore, seen to be expressed by visible efficiency in resolving the problems that caused it to be used in the first place. In the short term, this makes it possible to exercise the influence needed to encourage immediate progress within a project by avoiding blockages and slowdowns caused by problems. Over the long term, this helps meet key budget, schedule and quality constraints. Effectiveness in what we call first-level issues makes it possible to achieve satisfaction for stakeholders and, most importantly, clients and developers. This is functional effectiveness creating satisfaction linked to project aims. In parallel, political competence also helps avoid new threats to the successful development of the project in the short- and medium-term

by not generating frustration among stakeholders through actions or decisions made without consideration for their specific issues during these problematic scenarios. This effectiveness, in what we call second-level issues, makes it possible to maintain the satisfaction of several direct or indirect participants involved in the problems that need to be resolved. This is satisfaction linked to the methods and means which make functional effectiveness possible. As summarized in **Figure 2**, when deployed in parallel, the combined effects of collective political competence contribute to the performance and success of projects.

Toward shared leadership and collective stakeholder management

Overall, these results show that it is possible to suggest that not only can political management of project participants and stakeholders be considered a competence, but that this competence seems to be of a collective nature. We believe that these two factors will lead to certain implications for the political conceptualization of project leadership and stakeholder management.

As previously noted, although the literature search highlighted important gaps in the definitions of leadership due to the social environment of projects becoming more complex, political perspectives are generating increased interest by specifically putting forward social and relational competences. Many authors have, therefore, made reference to political competences, although these remain largely anchored in theoretical and normative approaches (Cicmil, 2006). However, our use of a definition of competence based on Le Boterf (2008) made it possible to describe the implementation of influential practices which make it possible to effectively manage situations involving stakeholders through an appropriate

FIGURE 1. Collective political competence

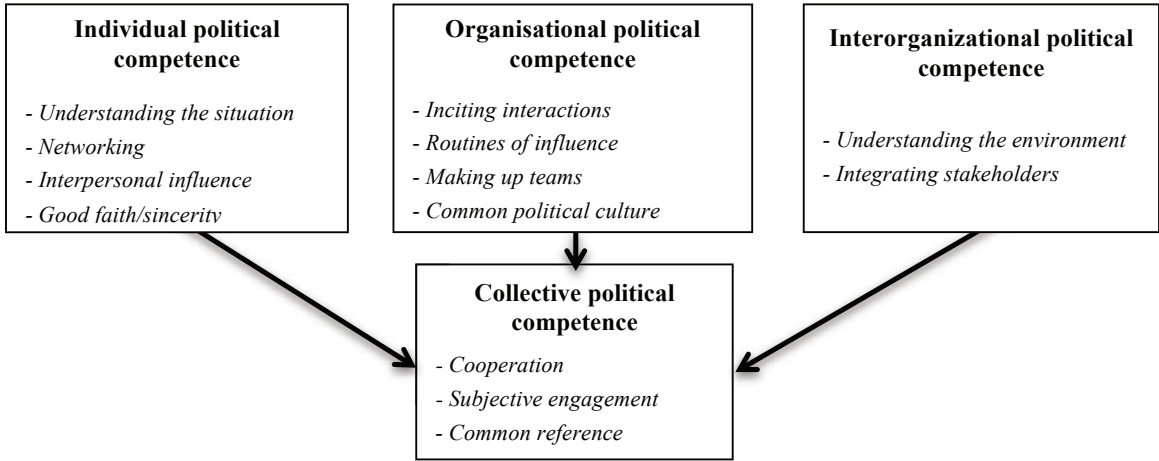
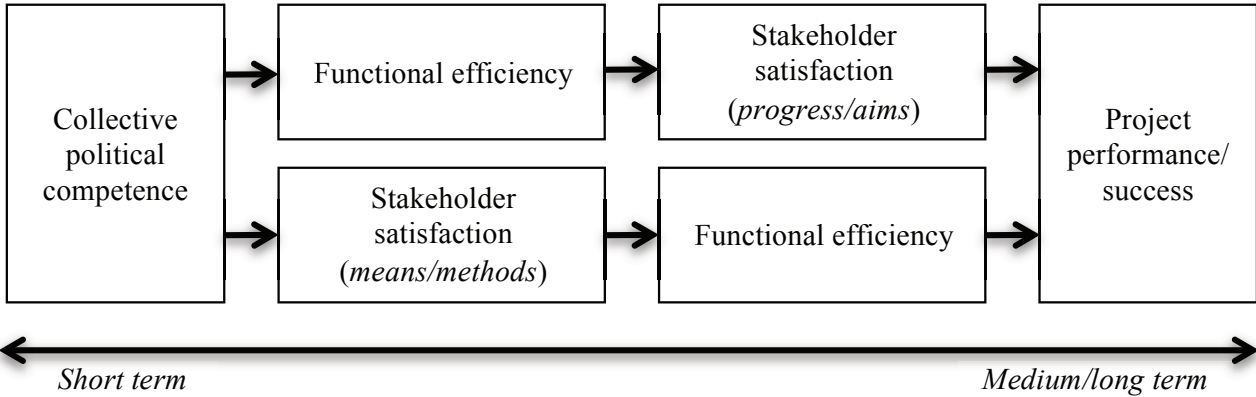


FIGURE 2. Effects of collective political competence across two levels



combination of resources. In this way, we believe that we have provided significant empirical elements to support the existence of political competence used in project leadership for which we have described the main outlines.

Among the characteristics of this competence, we believe that the collective aspect is of primary importance. While our results confirmed the importance of individual influence on the effectiveness of political competence, when linked to the work of Ferris et al. (2005), we can see that when combined with other levels of competence, it becomes capable of creating a professional practice adapted to the political dimension of projects. As noted within the framework of relationships between participants, only the implementation of individual political competence seems to be able to regularly overcome problematic situations regularly. However, it is primarily due to the combined effect of individual, organizational and sometimes inter-organizational competences that these situations can systematically be overcome while generating satisfaction among stakeholders. Individual levels of competence activated in isolation, therefore, seemed linked to functional effectiveness while collective competence created a combined effect of functional effectiveness and satisfaction for direct or indirect participants. Collective levels of political competence take on their full value for project managers with relation to current definitions of project performance and success which take this satisfaction into account. This also probably explains why the collective political competence we noted as part of project leadership was perceived positively while a traditionally individual political approach that seeks power for personal gain typically reflected negatively on organizational leaders (Padilla, Hogan, et al. 2007) and more specifically on projects (Toor & Ogunlana 2009).

The collective nature of the political competence described here seems strongly linked to renewed theories of leadership. Although project managers remain necessary, strategies, behav-

iors and competences, as observed in this project, clearly point to collective construction, a relational leadership deployed in complex social contexts involving many participants. The process of influence revealed by our data clearly go beyond the strict subordinate-superior framework to create a new shared or distributed dimension, as proposed by Lindgren and Pakendorff (2009). Furthermore, the agility demonstrated on several occasions in the construction of political competence across various pooled resources with relation to problems and situations and, therefore, participants involved, reflects the versatility and flexibility highlighted by some authors (Yukl, 2008). The ability to adapt a response to a situation by appropriately combining different resources illustrates a complex and adaptive leadership as described by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007). For the authors, and as we have seen for ourselves, the effect is not of an authoritarian, top-down action but one that emerges from participants during interactions and produces results that can be adapted and learned from.

The results of our investigation reveal that political management of stakeholders differs in several respects from the dominant models in the literature. Reference to a collective competence within this framework highlights the importance of considering not only methods but also end results. In terms of methodology, and in conjunction with our preceding comments relating to leadership, the key element can clearly be found within the shared responsibilities of stakeholder management. To our knowledge, none of the currently proposed models for this aspect of project management takes responsibility into account beyond that of the manager. The latter must manage and implement, or supervise the implementation of the tools and techniques needed to identify, analyze and communicate with stakeholders in addition to managing effective relationships with the stakeholders for the benefit of the project (Bourne and Walker, 2006). As projects open up and take on an increasing number of stakehold-

ers and challenges, the limitations of such an approach can clearly be seen. In contrast, the perspective provided by our results shows the effectiveness of cooperation between participants across several levels within the framework. Regardless of how significant it is, individual political competence cannot hope to gather all the resources needed to deal with the complexity of the numerous problems created by an increasing number of participants, who bring with them a growing number of increasingly varied issues. At best, it can attempt to avoid blockages or significant divergence from agreed constraints and targets. In contrast, collective political competence as defined by this study can benefit from this complexity by finding the resources needed among the large number and variety of participants, so that a diverse range of adapted combinations can be used to resolve a great many problems. Furthermore, in addition to this functional effectiveness with relation to issues directly linked to projects, the collective aspect of stakeholder management also makes it possible to take into account the individual issues of participants involved in the problems, thereby creating potential satisfaction among these participants in relation to the approach or resolution to the problem. Functional effectiveness can, therefore, generate satisfaction and vice versa, demonstrating a multiplier effect with the potential to significantly increase the likelihood of project success.

6. Research limitations

Despite its contributions, this research project does have its limitations. Firstly, it was based on a particularly restricted and specialized sample of projects, namely engineering projects in Quebec. Although this choice made it possible to focus on depth, the general applicability of our conclusions was limited compared to projects with other characteristics and scopes. The question arises as to whether political competence would have the same char-

acteristics as those observed when used for projects with intangible deliverables or smaller scales or those undertaken by and within smaller structures. Furthermore, it was not possible to set up adequate triangulation of data from our sources. Our initial aim was to question not only project managers but also one or two stakeholders for each of the investigated scenarios. With this level of cross-referenced information, it would have been possible to achieve a better level of objectivity as well as confront and compare the points of view and perceptions of the various participants. More direct observations, particularly when the selected incidents were occurring, would also have enriched our understanding of the sequence of events as well as making it possible to gather perceptions and interpretations from participants “in the moment.” The operational reality of this design was abruptly curtailed as companies refused to engage in the process, possibly due to the inclusion of politics in the questioning. In addition, the logistics required to facilitate this approach was found to be overly complicated due to the size of the projects and the number of confidentiality agreements. It should also be noted that the case studies selected did not include the pre-project phase which can be subject to intense political maneuvering and includes selecting and determining investments in companies as well as research into project acceptability, particularly for civil infrastructure projects. We were restricted by the availability of case studies and site accessibility. For all of the above reasons, we believe it is best to remain cautious with respect to the scope of the results obtained during this study.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory study was to contribute to a better understanding of how managers create conditions that encourage good progress and successful outcomes for projects characterized by high social complexity. Within this context, using the political perspective of organizations and of past work on the concept of competence, led us to

explore the relevance of considering the political management of project participants and stakeholders to be a collective competence in socially complex projects. Following a largely inductive investigation split into two phases, we would suggest that collective political competence does exist, and under certain conditions, allows managers as well as project groups to effectively deal with the presence of numerous independent participants, each with varying and even divergent interests. The results obtained also mesh into a collective and shared vision of project leadership and stakeholder management. In order to expand on this modest contribution, and also in light of its limitations, it seems relevant to suggest some potentially interesting ideas for further research. We believe it would be useful to repeat the process based on the model of collective political competence presented here, using projects with differing scales, characters and locations. Such an approach would help validate our definition of political competence in projects by taking into account additional situational issues and comparing their impacts. We also suggest a longitudinal study of a project using an ethnographic approach would make it possible to elaborate and reinforce our results with a dynamic focus on the conditions under which collective competence is built. Several elements missing from our study could then be taken into account, including a full project history and any mediation scenarios, from their beginnings to an analysis of their impact in the short and medium term. Any political phenomena present during the pre-project phase could also be analyzed, including any link to project selection or surrounding their initial acceptability for internal and external participants. In this situation, it would also be possible to implement a 360° approach in order to cross-reference points of view, outlooks and perceptions from various participants. This triangulation of information would make it possible to obtain a more detailed view of the processes implemented and aspects involved, with particular focus on combination processes originating from collective political competence, the “combinatorial knowledge” considered to be a black box by Le Boterf (1998).



Christophe Leyrie Professeur Département des sciences économiques et administratives Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. He has been a professor of project management at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi since 2000. He obtained a Master of Science in project management from Université du Québec à Montréal in Québec, Canada, and a Doctorate of Science in business from Université Jean Moulin-Lyon3 in France. He is a member of Multidisciplinary studies laboratory in project management (<http://www.uqac.ca/lemgp>) where his research interests center on project stakeholder management, organizational politics in projects and project leadership.

references

Can be seen online at www.journalmodernpm.com/public/issue07/References05.html