A Healthy Project: Start Together and Act from the Whole

- 'Short Odesys Story' -

Healthy project collaboration in projects – is there a doctor in the room?

Many projects stall — not just because of technical challenges, but mostly due to poor collaboration. Interests clash, communication falters, and conflicts escalate before the project has even properly begun. Instead of structural solutions, people often reach for quick fixes, treating symptoms rather than causes. The result? Delays, wasted energy, and drained resources. Projects don't always fail — but they often start wrong. And even when they start off well, they can still derail. That's when purported "project doctors" are called in, armed with presentations and well-meaning articles full of déjà-vu wisdom and open-door advice from past projects: " *Prepare thoroughly and collaborate by focusing on cooperation rather than just technics; consider all stakeholders and align their interests, taking time for a proper start, understanding the whole system to discover solutions, listening, setting goals, and leading with empathy, recognizing that technique alone does not determine project health, involving everyone to build a strong project, remembering that good preparation is half the battle, testing for both desirability and feasibility, making a realistic plan, staying flexible and adapting along the way, being transparent, communicating clearly and inclusively, ensuring everyone pulls in the same direction, aligning interests fairly, aiming for success where everyone is satisfied, including all stakeholder perspectives, adding up their wishes to formulate goals accordingly, and harnessing the wisdom of the crowd — or even AI…*"

But past results offer no guarantee for the future. And open doors without concrete tools leave the question 'how?' unanswered. What is needed is not just naming these open doors, but translating them into a decision-support approach aimed at a best fit from the future. Is an external "doctor" really necessary, or can teams learn to heal themselves — and their projects?

Improve your project: start together and design from the whole – a matter of salutogenesis!

A *healthy or 'sound'*[1] project is "best for project & people": it delivers the desired outcome for humans and their environment, while ensuring satisfied stakeholders who collectively determine *well-being*[2] — a play of freedom, equality, and fraternity. A project is often a complex challenge, a creative conflict of interests. Instead of merely viewing this conflict, there is a demand to resolve it. However, solving conflicts requires a conscious and transformative approach: turning destructive patterns into constructive outcomes. Conflicts of interest are not only inevitable but also necessary for development. They offer opportunities for growth and creation. Through continuous action, project organizations can not only address their challenges but also confront and solve them themselves. This requires self-healing capacity — the ability to transform creative conflicts into healthy solutions for the whole.

Project management is not merely a science; it is a practical art that demands continuous adaptation to changing contextual realities. This requires embracing an open-loop R&D innovation mindset[3] within the project team. Shaping the future is not about waiting or relying on "past results," but about actively creating it. Project management is, above all, a continuous process of designing, implementing, and redesigning. The only way to tackle complex projects is by actively involving people at all levels in this ongoing process of co-design and self-learning. The true strength of a project lies in the people who work on it.

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[1] **Healthy:** whole, sound, or complete (into a whole: holistic). Comparable to the Dutch word "gezond" or the German "gesund. Heal: to make something whole, to bring it back into balance or harmony, to cure. Comparable to the Dutch "helen" ('heel maken') or the German "heilen". **Satisfied:** literally 'made sufficiently whole,' often associated with a state of harmony or contentment. Compare the Dutch "tevreden" ('tot vrede maken').

[2] **Well-being** within an organization is a diaductive process between individual free will and collective value within an equitable framework. The organic harmony between these three spheres is essential for healthy project collaboration— comparable to a healthy body functioning as a whole in a balanced state (cf. the social threefolding principles of Rudolf Steiner). This goes beyond mere addition, integration, or synthesis. Well-being transcends success: a successful organization gets more out of a project than it puts in, whereas an organization guided by a well-being compass that contributes more to the whole than it receives. To quote Albert Einstein: "Try not to become a person of success, but rather a person of value".

[3] From an **R&D innovation mindset**, the aim is not simply to build according to specifications, but to continuously seek the best possible fit for the whole — especially 'on the run'.

A healthy project organisation balances material and spiritual forces through a moral compass of well-being, integrating economic, social, and cultural value factors[4] into a maximised associated preference value for all stakeholders involved. This creates a dynamic equilibrium, leading to sustainable projects and meaningful decision-making. Interests, constraints, and objectives cannot simply be added together; rather, their differences must be carefully balanced and minimised to arrive at a well-fitting and harmonious outcome. It is precisely these differences that generate value — a matter of social and physical balancing in the search for a best-fit.

Managing projects is a healthy open-card-game of transparency—between each other, with each other, and for each other. A truly healthy project emerges by achieving a '**best-fit for common purpose**'—a shared ideal within reach for both the end product and the process leading to it[5]. This requires an open and constructive approach so that, guided by the project well-being compass, individual free will, equality, and shared value can come together into a 'best for projects and people' whole. A project team plays the game 'well' when no one is sidelined, the ball stays in play, and the free space between players is optimally used. To realize this healthy project collaboration game, project decision-making must be thoroughly revised. Odesys turns **decision-making right-side up**, making the difference by:

1. **Turning** suboptimal, reactive decision-making into a proactive preferendum design approach to find a best fit - **Design thinking**[6].
2. **Shifting** from imposed vertical hierarchy to horizontal association by consistently applying the socio-organic principles of individual freedom, equality, and shared value - **Social thinking**[7].
3. **Transforming** one-sided subsystem differentiation into pure system integration, where interplay from the whole serves as the starting point to find the best synthesis of 'what is desired' and 'what is feasible'- **Systems thinking**[8].
4. **Embracing** a 'glass-box' model as a neutral, objectifying, and quantitatively supported decision-support tool, instead of an impulsive, closed, and purely subjective decision-enforcement game - **Slow thinking**[9].

[4] A **balance** between economic and ecological value factors within an isonomic value framework leads to a healthy project outcome and satisfied stakeholders: 'well-being' (cf. Rudolf Steiner's social threefolding). These value factors are also referred to as '**key value factors**' (**KVFs**), 'design-for-TY values,' or 'socio-eco purpose.'

[5] 'Healing' and a '**best fit for common purpose**' go beyond simply bringing together the classic triad of time, cost, and quality (fitness for purpose) of the end product.

[6] **Design thinking**, as described by Herbert Simon, is a process in which existing situations are **intentionally** transformed into desired states through creative problem-solving and iterative decision-making.

[7] **Social thinking**, as described by Rudolf Steiner, refers to the threefolding principles of the **social organism**: fraternity within the 'economic goods sphere' (value), freedom in the 'personal development sphere' (will), and equality (dignity) in the 'judicial agreements sphere' (agreements). Their "living-apart-but-together" (LAT) relationship ensures the uniqueness and independence of each domain, allowing them to strengthen one another and collectively create maximum social well-being.

[8] **Systems thinking**, as described by Russell Ackoff, refers to the insight that a system is never simply the sum of its parts, but rather the result of their **integrative** mutual interaction. Improving the whole rarely succeeds by optimizing the performance of just one or a few parts.

[9] **Slow thinking**, as described by Daniel Kahneman, refers to a thoughtful, analytical thinking process (as opposed to instinctive) for **deliberate** decision-making, where logical reasoning and, when relevant, quantitative evidence play a key role (see his System I: instinctive versus System II deliberative thinking).

The new Odesys methodology and the advanced Preferendus[10] decision-support tool integrate the four points outlined above. They represent the complex system both as a whole and as a design, providing deliberative support in finding the best-fitting solution—one in which the principles of freedom, equality, and togetherness are concretely embedded within the decision-making model. Stakeholders require open and effective decision support that seeks a best-fit for common purpose. Every day, projects demand such a 'best-fit' solution, especially 'on the run.' This groundbreaking approach results in the best-fitting solution for both process and product. Odesys focuses on how things ought to be, transforming complex situations into realistic, preferred outcomes. The Preferendus acts as a decision-making 'support-engine', helping to conceptualise what human minds can no longer conceive on their own within a multidimensional solution space. By taking a step back and zooming out, an optimal decision can be generated from the whole and in collaboration. Naturally, the final say remains with the human, who ultimately makes the decision. This open-ended design approach transcends conventional technical modelling methods, focusing instead on the underlying and associated human preferences that truly make the difference. It is a systemic approach centred on common purpose, transparency, and mutual understanding. Odesys facilitates a form of problem-solving where all cards are laid openly on the table, aiming for an optimal and healthy project outcome—rather than a 'cards close to the chest' game that leads the group to miss opportunities for both people and society.

This Odesys approach[11] proves invaluable in complex projects to prevent building what is what is essentially suboptimal ('no-regret'[12]), or loss of control leading to derailment ('in-control'[13]). In truth, most projects don't fail — they often start wrong, lacking a healthy socio-technical foundation ('viable'). And even when they start well, they can still lose direction and become unhealthy over time. What's needed is an action-oriented and well-grounded decision-making process that enables confronting project complexity in a collaborative and balanced manner across different phases. To that end, Odesys offers a proven[14] three-phase approach to optimize both process and product — within a socio-physical reach — using the Preferendus tool across the project lifecycle: i.e.,

[10] The **Preferendus** does not aim for a suboptimal compromise but offers an ideal-seeking solution focused on maximizing group value: a 'compass' of value that goes beyond the after-the-fact creation of TOMs (Trade-Off Matrices, which can turn out to be an illusion of free choice).

[11] **Odesys** (Open Design Systems) has specifically been extended into **Odycon** (Open Design and Dynamic Control) to address dynamic design-planning and control.

[12] **No-regret** plans to define the right scope and establish a feasible plan from the (re)start..

[13] **In-control** strategies to optimally steer projects during execution.

[14] Over the past few years, we have **successfully applied Odesys** in around 60 student projects per year. In addition, **Odesys/Odycon has been used in projects** with Boskalis, TotalEnergies, Microsoft, BAM, Rijkswaterstaat (the Groene Boog / SAAOne projects), and the Municipality of Naaldwijk. See www.odesys.nl.

Systems thinking Social and Design thinking Slow to…

(AF #1) … Agree First[15] – defining a socio-technical feasible project scope ('viable')

Examples include a wind turbine project in Oss, where Odesys modeling revealed that the wind park was not socio-technically feasible, and that the system boundaries needed to be expanded to arrive at a viable ("levensvatbaar") energy transition solution. Or a light rail project in Bergen, where the municipality's proposed solution turned out to be suboptimal. Or the creation of an optimal zoning plan ("vlekkenplan") for the development of a new residential area in the municipality of Naaldwijk, which uncovered more potential than initially expected.

(AF #2) … Act Feasibly – developing an optimal project plan ('no-regret')

Examples include a South Korean offshore floating wind project, where the Odesys/Odycon approach was used to determine optimal installation fleet scheduling and wind farm layout engineering from the perspectives of both the energy provider and the marine contractor. Or a Dutch rail project, in which the best renovation of a railway crossing was established based on input from the passenger organization as well as the construction and maintenance organizations. Or a U.S. offshore wind project, where an optimal logistics transport and installation planning was developed considering multiple objectives (cost, time, fleet utilization, sustainability).

(AF #3) … Adapt Flexibly – determining optimal project control strategies ('in-control')

Examples include Dutch road infrastructure projects (such as SAA A1/A6 and A13/A16), where the Odycon approach was used to select an optimal set of risk mitigation measures to steer the projects regarding schedule, budget, traffic disruption, and environmental impact. Or the Dutch tunnel replacement program, where centralization and clustering of various activities enabled optimal adjustments to ensure effective tunnel closures each time, based on multiple objectives such as availability and cost.

In the above project examples, Odesys has created the best achievable solution that maximally satisfies all stakeholders[16] as a group. This is not a compromise, but a 'best-fit for common purpose' synthesis — a matter of social-physical fitting and measuring. This human-centred design approach makes project management concrete and action-oriented, effectively resolving creative conflicts between interests and feasibility. Odesys moves beyond the 'open doors' of project doctors, actively relying on the project organisation's self-healing capacity and overall well-being, building 'bridges' by minimising differences.

Collective decision-making is a game played by, with, and for each other[17]. Through this, sound and healthy project plans are forged together into a unified whole, transforming initial conflicts of interest into harmony (satisfaction). Odesys goes beyond pseudo-democratic principles such as

[15] **"Think before you act (Bezint eer ge begint)"**: it's a matter of forward-thinking, from and for the whole.

[16] Active **stakeholders** are participating decision-makers, decision-making stakeholders, or directly involved parties.

[17] Compare here the so-called **mutual aid** principle, or the '**from I to we**' movement, or the principle of '**for the greater good'** or **'better whole'**.

'majority rules,' 'leaving no one behind,' or 'equal dissatisfaction'[18], replacing them with open diacratic[19] decision-making based on freedom ('will'), equality ('dignity'), and fraternity ('value').

Finally, Odesys transforms idealistic '*dreamwork*' into valuable '*teamwork*' through fourfold forward-thinking from the whole — via a unique synergy of "Systems Thinking Social" and "Design Thinking Slow." In this way, becoming aware of an ideal that turns into reality forms the true union of a team, resulting in a healthy project : a matter of integrative, socio-organic, intentional, and deliberative thinking — all aimed at finding a best-fit for common purpose.

[18] '**Majority rule**' is a form of decision enforcement that, by definition, leaves losers behind. The consent principle of '**leaving no one behind**' — or the min-max optimization principle of '**equal dissatisfaction**' — often leads to suboptimal compromises or even impasses.

[19] **Diacracy** (from the Greek dia — "between several," and kratein — "to govern") is a system in which power or influence is distributed horizontally across different layers or sub-elements of a whole, without a central authority. Each element retains its own autonomy while collaborating to achieve a common purpose.