

UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF CHAOS

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From discussions with senior managers, project managers and site managers at a national contractor, it became clear that the labels they applied to things, the terms which they used to describe circumstances, had influence over their subsequent actions. In particular, the same situation on a construction project may be described as 'chaos', or as 'disorder'. If 'chaos' is chosen, a sense of uncontrollability is conveyed, and the manager is less likely to act positively. If 'disorder' is applied, the manager will act positively to bring about order, to manage. The two terms could be applied to identical situations. This paper concerns exploratory research into the linguistics of the managers, and their shared understandings of the meanings conveyed by terms. The paper briefly introduces the notion of the constitutive nature of communication and discourse, and shows how this impacts upon the behaviour of managers. Ethnomethodology was adopted to develop a commonly accepted understanding of terminology for the researcher and the practitioners. Further, this paper provides an insight into one of the fundamental meanings of the term to 'manage', as expressed by active managers in construction.

Keywords: discourse, ethnomethodology, language.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of construction projects is widely accepted as complex. This complexity is evidenced in a number of different ways: the size of the project, the technical complexity, the contractual arrangements used, the means by which the contract is financed, and the client-consultant-contractor relationship are just some examples of this. This leads to a situation in which it is fairly easy to conceive that the conditions encountered on any particular project become very confused. This condition is supported by experiences in the field and the empirical reports of practitioners, such as those involved in this investigation.

This condition, this confusion, is one of the distinctive features of construction activity, and it underlies the unpredictable nature of projects. It should be stressed that construction projects are not inherently unpredictable, it is rather that certain unforeseen problems beset most projects from time to time. The lack of predictability lies in the interrelationship of the many different facets of the project as noted above.

Project managers and contracts managers assume a central role in dealing with and managing these unpredictable conditions as they occur. It is fair to assume that this is a major part of their role within a contracting organization.

How this condition is encountered by the project and contract managers, how it comes to be known, and how it is subsequently dealt with by them is the focus of this paper.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

Ethnomethodology is concerned with examining the language with which practitioners in a social collectivity communicate with one another about their environment. That is, how the practitioners (in this case construction managers) make sense of the experiences they encounter. This position recognizes and accepts the premise that the experiences are interpreted socially rather than purely on an individual basis. This position also recognizes the constitutive nature of language and communication, and the interactive means by which collectivities develop shared understandings or discourse.

Collectivities develop a discourse, that is a common accepted communication of shared understanding. The discourse is developed to communicate concerns amongst the members of the collectivity. This in turn accepts the notion that the description of reality, of the environment is socially constructed.

Berger and Luckman argue that reality is socially constructed. Within a society, there will be a view about what is real, and this will be different in another society (Simms et al. 1993: 287)

The collectivity in question, the construction managers, have a developed means of shared understanding, a discourse. Within this discourse, they can communicate with one another about their shared concerns and shared values. Within this communication the use of words and terms take on specific meanings related to and with reference to the shared experiences of the group.

Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world (Harris 1988: ix)

The simplistic view of language as straightforward labels for objects perceived in the real world is discounted. Rather, words are the means by which discourse (and shared understanding) is developed by the group.

“Words do not merely reflect that which is being talked about. They actually construct or even constitute what is being talked about...The words both represent and are represented by, the culture to which they belong (Simms et al. 1993: 244)

This discourse in turn provides a shared understanding, a shared view of the world. Language and communication is constitutive of their shared perception, hence the shared perception is socially constructed. Ethnomethodology is concerned with this construction.

...reality is socially constructed [and that the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which this occurs] (Berger and Luckman 1969: 13)

A fundamental insight of ethnomethodology is that the primordial site of social order is found in members' use of methodical practices to produce, make sense of, and therefore render accountable, features of their local circumstances. In so doing, they constitute these circumstances as a real-world setting of practical action (Boden and Zimmerman 1993: 6)

The study of ethnomethodology is a study of how the practitioners themselves, the members of a collectivity, develop a shared understanding. The experiences and

concerns of the collectivity are commonly the day-to-day activities and experiences of the group.

Ethnomethodology turns [instead] to the detailed study of how the features of social life are recurrently accomplished on singular occasions through these incarnate practices (Garfinkel 1988) (Boden and Zimmerman 1993: 7)

This paper does not attempt to investigate and explicate the overall social construct of the managerial group in question. This paper confines itself to the specific issue of unpredictability and unforeseen problems on construction projects, and how these problems are dealt with.

UNPREDICTABILITY OF CONSTRUCTION

Within the duration of the project on site, circumstances are likely to occur which had not been predicted prior to commencement. It is these circumstances, and their ramifications, which have to be managed by the project managers. Many commentators have referred to this condition.

In the last twenty years, all aspects of construction projects have become more complex technically, legally, financially, in speed, in size and in industrial relations. The roles of those involved have become more demanding, particularly in management, planning and co-ordination (CIRIA: 7)

Furthermore, the characteristic features of the construction industry as a whole are given as reasons why such problems occur.

The argument is often made that the construction industry is highly compartmentalized, highly fragmented, under-capitalized and operates on a single project-by-project basis, and so on (McGeorge and Palmer 1997: 121).

The complexity of the project itself is the focus for scrutiny in many construction management textbooks.

Construction projects involve hundreds or even thousands of interacting activities, each with a cost, time, quality, and sequencing problem. The costs and durations are uncertain and one response, still surprisingly common, is to shy away from uncertainty and hope for the best. (Flanagan and Norman 1993: 22).

More recently, the term risk has been introduced into the description, to denote once again the unpredictable interactive and complex nature of construction problems.

Construction projects are complex, have a long production cycle and involve the input of a multitude of participants. They are therefore associated with risks and uncertainties (Kwakye 1997: 41).

There is a widely held belief that one of the characteristics of construction projects is that of unpredictability. Many construction management texts concern themselves with how this characteristic may be dealt with, how it may be managed.

HOW MANAGERS PERCEIVE UNPREDICTABILITY

In the case study, the researcher was present during a lengthy interaction between practising senior project and contracts managers from a National UK Construction company. The research involved recording the interaction, and discussing with the participants their understanding of the issues being discussed. The discussion was focused on experiences of projects on which major problems had been encountered. This was the researcher's own 'lead in' to the discussion.

In the first instance, it was noted that none of the participants discussed the detail of the project concerned, apart from in the briefest of possible terms. The technical, contractual, financial or organizational problems associated with the particular projects were not drawn out and examined in minute detail. This occasion was apparently not considered to be appropriate for such an examination. However, the nature and size of the projects was such that the brief introductions made by one individual would draw acknowledgement from the majority of the other participants: they knew what was being spoken about. In other words, there was a shared knowledge, a corporate knowledge of projects which had experienced problems.

So, the individual projects were introduced into the discussion in the briefest possible manner. Following this introduction, the means by which the circumstances of the problems were discussed and understood by the participants became the focus of the researcher's enquiry. The sense in which problems are 'understood' by the participants may be judged by the way they discuss the issues, and demonstrate how they overcame them. This collective understanding of the issues, the communication about them or discourse, is the means by which they are revealed both to the other participants and the researcher.

Of particular significance in the discussion was the emphasis placed on the terms 'chaos' and 'disorder'. All the participants recognized and acknowledged that the term 'chaos' was emotive and suggestive of circumstances which had become 'out of control' and 'beyond rectification'. The term 'disorder' on the other hand was accepted as a term which could be used to describe a serious circumstance, but which still allowed for affirmative action to be taken. This distinction between the two terms became clear only in the course of the discussion, but all parties were agreed on the use of the terms.

The following is an extract from the discussion between the manager group and the researcher:

"You see.... when [contract x - above ground works for a major colliery site, mainly reinforced concrete work] was up and running, we had a back up tower crane, back up scaffolding, we thought we had covered every angle... but the shuttering all got jammed up. We couldn't strike the shuttering. And the next lift was due in - wagon loads of ready mix all waiting to deliver. All the trades were knocked back waiting for the shuttering to be moved.

That's the sort of situation we have to deal with all the time

That's right"

RES: "Would you call that chaos?"

"No, no, you have to get on, get it sorted. We see a problem and immediately you're looking for ways of solving it. The first step for that is

put it in context, limit the knock on effect. In essence it's disorder, not chaos."

Most importantly, the circumstances in which the two terms could be applicable was accepted as being identical. That is, the environment, the project, external to the participants discussing it could display characteristics which would commonly be perceived as chaotic, but the managers concerned would assert that this was disorder. This matter was discussed further. One project manager suggested that if you took someone from outside construction, an accountant or a factory manager, and showed them the experiences commonly encountered on a construction project, they would perceive those experiences as 'chaotic'. This view was widely held in the group: construction project problems, by their nature appear chaotic to someone with little knowledge of construction.

This reinforces the ethnomethodological nature of the study, in that the discussion centred upon the manner in which the objective world of reality came to be perceived by the practitioners. The nature of the reality may indeed be considered as 'chaotic'. The issue of concern both to the researcher and to the managers creating a collective understanding was the terms *they* applied to *their* experiences.

The use of a term such as 'chaotic' is, of course, judgmental or subjective. There can be no strictly defined circumstances which would be acceptable to each individual as fulfilling the characteristics of chaos. This acknowledgement serves two purposes: the first is to verify the subjective nature of the terms by which experiences may be described and communicated, the second is to demonstrate the collective agreement and discourse amongst the practitioners, that is, their ethnomethodology. Similarly, 'disorder' must be considered as a subjective description of an experience - a perception of reality.

When challenged on their means of distinguishing between the two subjective terms they could apply to the objective reality, the managers concurred (after some discussion) that by applying the term disorder (even subconsciously) this allowed room for action to be taken. The managers would mentally and orally describe the situation as disorderly in order to deal with it. The group developed a 'discourse', that is a locally constructed means of communicating a shared understanding of experiences of reality. The features of this discourse which were of interest to this research were the terms chaos and disorder.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper is essentially a report of an empirical investigation of a discussion between practising project managers and contracts managers at a National UK Contracting company. The issue under discussion, and the focus of this investigation, is the means by which these practising managers understand, communicate and deal with serious problems and disruptions on projects. In particular, the use of the terms 'chaos' and 'disorder'. Both of these are subjective, judgmental terms, both could be applied to the same circumstances or experiences. However, in the course of the discussion, it was agreed by the management group, that to apply the term disorder was more 'positive', and would indicate that action was being taken to bring about rectification of the problem.

This revelation has two implications which are worthy of further investigation: The first is the ethnomethodological study of the means by which managers collectively agree on the perception of their experiences. This collective agreement is established

through the discourse, the communication between the parties to establish common meanings and understandings. In this instance, the investigation has focused on one issue of 'chaos' or 'disorder'.

Secondly, this investigation offers an insight into the role of active managers in construction. The role of the project manager and the contracts manager is often concerned with dealing with disruptions and problems with construction projects. The means by which such actions are taken is of vital importance in construction management research. How managers themselves conceive of their role is central to this. In this case, the active role involves bringing about order into circumstances which are perceived as disorder.

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