

# On Tensions and Paradoxes in Project Environments

## Guest Editors

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## Background and Motivation

All projects experience tensions, some of which are paradoxical—such as contradictory yet interrelated demands that persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Projects are expected to deliver on time, on budget, and within scope, while at the same time meet diverse, often conflicting demands of multiple stakeholder groups (Sun et al., 2024; Ninan et al., 2025). Projects must deliver lasting solutions while also focusing on short-term performance pressures (Gaim et al., 2022a). Tensions in projects intensify in interorganizational delivery models and in complex project environments due to higher uncertainty, diverse stakeholder interests, and competing institutional pressures (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016; Wiewiora & Desouza, 2022).

This special issue invites manuscripts that advance understanding of how tensions and paradoxes in project environments are surfaced and navigated, influencing one another and evolving over time. In particular, we seek theory-informed and theory-building manuscripts that explore how tensions arise, potentially interact, and can be productively leveraged (Sun & Tell, 2025; Grothe-Hammer et al., 2025). We invite authors to move beyond framing tensions in projects as “either/or” prioritization challenges. Instead, we invite work that advances “both/and” approaches (Smith & Lewis, 2022), less understood “more-than” approaches (Putnam et al., 2016) and emerging ideas such as plasticity (Sydow et al., 2025), which enable a

*This special issue focuses on understanding how tensions and paradoxes—defined as persistent, interdependent, and often contradictory demands—emerge, interact, and evolve within project environments, particularly in complex project settings. It invites contributions that move beyond viewing tensions as problems to resolve, instead examining how they can be navigated, leveraged, and even harnessed to improve project outcomes. Emphasis is placed on multilevel dynamics (individual, team, organizational, and interorganizational); the role of context, time, and emerging technologies; and key debates in project studies such as sustainability, stakeholder management, and project learning, with the aim of advancing theory.*

repurposing and reconfiguring of project routines, resources, and relationships to navigate persisting tensions more effectively.

## Tensions and Paradoxes Across Levels

A core premise of this special issue is that tensions and paradoxes occur across multiple domains of project work and at different levels.

- At the individual level, project actors commonly experience identity tensions between commitment to the project and commitment to the parent organization (Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; DeFillippi & Uriarte, 2020; Wiewiora, 2023) and navigate opposing project leadership styles (Szentés, 2018). Understanding is emerging of emotional responses triggered by tensions (Burström & Wilson, 2018). Yet, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how project actors experience tensions through cognitive, behavioral, and emotional lenses. We invite manuscripts that advance understanding on how project actors experience these tensions and how their experiences evolve over time. How can project leadership training equip project leaders with abilities to confidently manage tensions and paradoxes in projects?

- At the project or team level, tensions often appear in how project collaboration and decision-making are organized. Project teams must navigate competing decision-making styles of project actors (Calabretta et al., 2017), oscillate between divergence and convergence in project decision-making (De Bruijn & Leijten, 2007), and develop a culture to navigate collaborative and competitive behaviors (Keller et al., 2017). To study this phenomenon, researchers might ask how project actors collaboratively make sense of and manage competing priorities in projects. How can we encourage living with paradoxes in engaged collaboration and decision-making in projects?
- Projects rarely operate in isolation but are embedded in other projects or in the more permanent structures provided by organizations, interorganizational networks, or ecosystems—giving rise to additional tensions and paradoxes (Lampel & Braun, 2020). For instance, in the context of multinational firms, projects have been used as a mechanism for implementing the strategic duality of achieving global integration and local responsiveness (Birkinshaw, 2016; Wiewiora, 2023). Recent research by Sun and Tell (2025) showed how prototypes help navigate tensions between the project and the organization’s differing goals. Simard and Aubry (2025) showed the role of project management offices in negotiating tensions between traditional and agile paradigms in delivering large digital transformation projects. Grothe-Hammer et al. (2025) show how organizational stability and change can be navigated through project work. We welcome further research exploring the relevance of contexts beyond the single project for the emergence and management of tensions, including global, cross-cultural projects and projects using different processes and technologies.
- Tensions intensify in complex project environments (Gaim et al., 2022a)—such as large interorganizational or megaprojects—due to multiple institutional contexts, governance systems, knowledge domains, and distinct characteristics (DeFillippi and Sydow, 2016; Huang & Desouza, 2025; Vestola & Hedborg, 2025). In the context of megaprojects, Brunet (2021) argues that due to differing objectives between project and partnering organizations, tensions are deeply ingrained, and attaining an overall equilibrium is extremely challenging. Vestola and Hedborg (2025) offer useful insights into the role of informal collaborative practices for navigating tensions in interorganizational projects. Shentes (2018) calls for a systemic paradox perspective to better understand tensions across individuals, project teams, and governance structures. We encourage submissions with a multilevel perspective to explain how tensions travel across levels and system boundaries, and how to shape multilevel responses to these tensions. Submissions to this special issue can also offer insights into the project complexity literature (Cicmil & Marshall, 2005; Geraldi, Maylor, & Williams, 2011; Maylor & Turner, 2018). Complexity in projects arises from competing priorities, misaligned objectives, and unclear decision-making authority (Project Management Institute, 2026). A paradox lens offers a useful way to surface, unpack, and navigate project complexities. Relevant questions include: How are tensions surfaced and managed in complex or interorganizational project environments? How do

multiple tensions interact and evolve over time? How do individual-, project-, and organizational-level interactions shape how tensions are navigated?

## Working With and Managing Tensions in Project

Projects do not fail because tensions exist. Rather, they may fail because tensions are ignored, polarized, or prematurely resolved. We encourage submissions that examine not only the novel ways to work with tensions and paradoxes but also the unintended consequences (Gaim et al., 2022b).

- For richer theoretical insights, we encourage critical engagement with paradoxical theorizing (Keller et al., 2025) that promises a more structured and deeper way of engaging with tensions. Keller et al. (2025) encourage attention to social context, cultural values, and language as well as the role of time, space, and technology in shaping how tensions are understood and addressed.
- Because many tensions remain latent, we encourage researchers to explore visual ways to surface tensions. Visual approaches can help map the boundaries of tensions, identify their connecting elements, and trace how these tensions evolve and interact over time (Pradies et al., 2023).
- The paradox mindset, or “the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tensions” (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018, p. 26), may help in navigating paradoxical tensions. Recent work conceptualizes the paradox mindset as a multilevel phenomenon (Halton & Wiewiora, 2025). We encourage submissions that explore how the paradox mindset can be scaled up to project team and organizational levels for a more systemic way to deal with tensions.
- We encourage contributions that shift the conversation from mitigating tensions to leveraging or harnessing tensions. We encourage exploring tensions and ways for managing them by going beyond “both/and” approaches to dealing with paradox by exploring further “more-than” approaches (Putnam et al., 2016). This can involve situating tensions in new configurations and exploring how interplay between competing demands leads to a transcending approach that may potentially lead to unexpected solutions. What capabilities enable projects to work productively with tensions?
- Finally, although authors may explicitly draw on paradox theory as a powerful lens for understanding persistent and interdependent tensions, we do not assume that paradox theory is the only lens through which tensions can be theorized. We therefore welcome work engaging alternative or complementary theoretical perspectives that can provide deep conceptualization and exploration of tensions in project environments.

## Using a Paradox Lens to Explore Unresolved and Emerging Debates in Project Studies

Several long-standing or emerging debates in project studies remain unresolved, and a paradox lens may offer new ways to advance them.

- For instance, research on project learning has a long history (Grabher, 2004; Brady & Davies, 2004; Sydow et al., 2004; Duffield & Whitty, 2015; AlMaian & Bu-Qammaz, 2023), yet the issues around capturing, sharing, and using learnings from projects persist. Limited research using paradox and ambidexterity lenses surfaced three tensions that explain some of these learning challenges: the ease of knowledge creation and the difficulty of its transferring beyond the project (Bakker et al., 2011), project learning versus performing (Wiewiora & Desouza, 2022), and project exploitation versus exploration (Davies et al., 2016). To further advance understanding of these learning paradoxes, we invite manuscripts that explore ways to better manage project learning with project delivery pressures. Emerging debates highlight tensions between human capabilities and capabilities of algorithmic technologies (large language models and AI agents) that are increasingly being used for project decision-making and project knowledge management. Interesting questions to explore can include: How do project actors negotiate between human judgment and AI recommendations? How do technologies such as generative AI (GenAI) support the capture, integration, and use of project knowledge, and do they help address or intensify the project learning paradoxes?
- Achieving sustainability outcomes in projects remains challenging precisely due to competing demands of sustainability goals with traditional project goals (Sabini & Alderman, 2021; Ninan et al., 2025). A paradox perspective invites us to treat such tensions not as problems to eliminate but as ongoing and unavoidable tensions that leaders need to embrace and work with (Hahn et al., 2015). But how can sustainability and project priorities be reframed as interdependent rather than only competing? Which project practices can enable the integration of sustainability priorities into project success? How is sustainability interpreted and shaped by competing motivations, institutional pressures, and organizational objectives?
- Projects bring together diverse stakeholder groups with competing priorities and diverse perspectives (Aubry et al., 2025; Jacobsson & Linderoth, 2025). This triggers a range of tensions, such as including versus excluding broader stakeholder groups in decision-making (Samset & Volden, 2016; Cuganesan & Floris, 2020), cooperation versus competition between interorganizational project partners (Naderpajouh et al., 2024), power-sharing or power-keeping (Giezen et al., 2015), managing stakeholders' differing project narratives (Ninan et al., 2025), or looking out for one's own interest versus the project's interest (Jacobsson & Linderoth, 2025). These tensions are distributed throughout the project life cycle and can be interrelated—that is, responding to one tension can trigger or intensify another (Sun et al., 2024). A paradox lens can further advance understanding of how to navigate polarities and competing interests among diverse stakeholders (Greco et al., 2025). We invite research that investigates how project leaders recognize and work with stakeholders' competing demands. How can engaging competing stakeholder perspectives shape decision-making, stakeholder alignment, and the

development of more resilient project outcomes? How can projects manage stakeholder-related tensions in politically and socially sensitive environments?

In terms of methodological approaches, we welcome conceptual, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method contributions that advance and challenge existing debates on tensions and paradoxes in project environments. Recent research by Simard and Aubry (2025) and Sun et al. (2024) demonstrate the value of longitudinal and multiple case study designs in uncovering how tensions in project organizing emerge, interact, evolve over time, and are negotiated. We therefore particularly encourage submissions that adopt methodologies that can capture the dynamic, rather than static, nature of tensions. Longitudinal case studies, comparative case designs, action research, design science research, and engaged scholarship are useful as they enable closer engagement with context and participants, providing a more nuanced and practically relevant understanding of tensions..

## Submission Process and Timeline for the Special Issue

### Proposed Submission Process

- Before submission of a full paper, please send a 1,000–1,200-word abstract (references are excluded from the word count) via the *Project Management Journal*® online submission system (<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/pmj>) by **31 October 2026**.
- The extended abstract should clearly outline the research purpose, research gap, research question(s), theoretical background, methodological approach, and potential contributions to research and practice.
- The guest editorial team will send out invitations for full papers based on the evaluation of submitted abstracts in **mid-Dec 2026**.
- We will organize a workshop for the authors invited to submit full papers to discuss and help develop their papers into full submission. Attendance to the workshop is not a precondition for submission. The workshop is tentatively scheduled for end of **March 2027**.
- Full manuscripts of the invited submissions are due before **30 June 2027**.
- Submit your full manuscript via the *Project Management Journal*® online submission system at <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/pmj> and select article type “SI: Tensions and Paradoxes in Projects.”

### Proposed Timeline and Key Dates

- Call for papers announcement: **June 2026**
- Abstract submission deadline: **31 October 2026**
- Full manuscript submission deadline for invited abstracts: **30 June 2027**
- Expected publication: **Q1 of 2028**

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