

Project Management in the time of COVID¹

Uncertainty – Is it time to rethink? ²

Dr. Lynda Bourne

In December 2019 reports of a new deadly virus originating in China was only a minor news item here in Australia. We were battling severe bushfires in the eastern States; our focus was on the consequences of that disaster. In the meantime, COVID was spreading throughout the globe by way of Italy and then everywhere! The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020 and Australia closed its borders. The whole nation went into lockdown – the first. With remarkably high spirits we shared our successes with sourdough bread and family groups singing uplifting songs, in the knowledge that ‘we were all in this together, globally’. Those of us with white collar jobs were able to work from home, our children learnt from home, we bought puppies and embraced lockdown as a new adventure. Others, people working in health or service jobs still had to provide services to the rest of us, putting themselves at risk. We ‘beat’ the virus temporarily, but it continued to spread, and further lockdowns followed. Different Australian States had different approaches but most included state border closures, mandatory mask wearing, online shopping until our federal Government belatedly acquired sufficient supplies of vaccines.

At the time of writing (March 2022) we are now ‘living with the virus’ having achieved around 90% take up of two doses of vaccine nationally with a lower percentage (60%) of those who had received three doses. People are still being infected; some recover and some do not, but at a lower level than either previous COVID years.

For two years (and counting) COVID-19 has disrupted every aspect of our social and working lives in Australia, as it has in all other parts of the globe, and we all have experienced a heightened level of anxiety as we came to terms with the effects of the pandemic.

What has happened in Australia appears to reflect the experiences of the global population. Every part of a country’s social and work environment has been disrupted; the general effects of this disruption has been to cause organizations everywhere to re-think how to continue to trade or provide services in the ensuing hostile and uncertain environment. As our population worked

¹ This series is by Dr. Lynda Bourne, author of the books *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation* (2009), *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders* (2011) and several others. She is a globally-recognized expert on project stakeholder engagement, risk management and other PM-related topics. For more, see her author profile at the end of this article.

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through the abrupt realisation that we don't not know how to protect ourselves from the virus, that vaccines and other remedies were not available at that time and our 'life as usual' disintegrated, we were experiencing uncertainty and the anxiety that comes with it.

Two years later most of the developed world is now 'living with COVID'; the general desire in these countries is to establish a 'new normal'. There is impetus and opportunity to reform, to rethink approaches, to review process, and improve practices. This desire is as relevant in the world of project management as it is in the wider world of ordinary lives and livelihoods.

In the world of COVID-normal project work, organizations must prepare for 'afterwards' and review and reform risk identification and management processes and practices through:

- Acceptance and management of uncertainty and the anxiety that it produces
- Addressing the complexities of relationships - teams, other stakeholders
- Ensure resilience and adaptability to enable effective delivery of outcomes in the changing contexts of uncertainty.

In this paper I will discuss what uncertainty might mean post-pandemic through a discussion of the concept of a Zone of Uncertainty; how the current heightened awareness of uncertainty and 'unknown unknowns' can contribute to more effective risk management practice and how introduction of the concepts of resilience, persistence and adaptability may assist individuals, groups and organizations to recover, review and reform their practices.

Uncertainty – time to rethink?

The future is uncertain! We don't know what is going to happen next. *Will unexpected storms ruin my outdoor wedding? Will we make it to the next milestone? Will I contract COVID and how will that affect me, or my team?* We can rely on the predictions of weather forecasts or cumulative scientific knowledge, but mostly we just hope for the best, only sometimes preparing for the worst. Previously, we chose to consider an absence of certainty as unremarkable and therefore no cause for concern *if it does not affect us or our plans*. Under normal circumstances we tend to be influenced by inherent biases such as Optimism Bias and are more inclined to treat risk management in many projects as a box-ticking exercise. Now as millions of people die during the pandemic, economies tank, and we are more sensitive to uncertainties, is it time to rethink our approach to risk identification and management?

What is risk, really?

Risk has been previously defined as 'uncertainty that matters' or uncertain events that will have a positive or negative effect on completion or success of an activity if it occurs. I propose a modification to this definition: *risk is uncertainty that matters to you* (or your project, organization, or community). The pandemic affected the whole global population, and so, the disruption to our lives, the fear of infection was

everybody's uncertainty. Different people or groups reacted to this uncertainty in different ways, depending on their risk appetite, their access to factual information, and also their personal views of the role of governments.

Risks are often categorised as 'known unknowns' (not being able to find an expert for the team at the right time) or 'unknown unknowns' (a pandemic). Pre-pandemic, project risk identification and management were often seen as an early project ritual, a box to be ticked, the resulting documentation then filed away with other project archive documents. In other, better managed projects, risk management had been seen as important as an act of preparedness and diligence. However, communication of the consequence of risks or issues often needed to be modified to make allowances for management's alarm at the delivery of the 'bad news' or concern about the effect of risk treatments on the project budget.

The anxiety that results from risk realised through unusual examples of uncertainty can be viewed as a continuum, tracing the awareness of the consequences of the issue (no longer a risk) and the consequent anxiety over time, as:

- Other disasters become more recent and replace the original horror and immediacy (now the disaster of flooding in our eastern regions and the war in Ukraine have relegated information about daily COVID hospitalisations and death to later parts of the news).
- More information becomes available – as scientists learned more about the virus they were able to explain what was really happening and what was being done to improve the situation
- News about the progress of the virus was no longer 'new'. We had adapted to the changing situations and the consequences of actions being taken to keep us safe.

Figure 1 traces changing levels of anxiety throughout the pandemic. This is my very subjective assessment of anxiety at various points throughout the pandemic to March 2022. The 'elder' data was collected from my own experience and those of others of my age group (65-80), and the 'young' data was collected from conversations with younger members of my family and their information about how their peers were responding to the progress of the pandemic.

The measurement scale was a comparison of respondent's reports with Amount at Stake³ at each point calculated from perceptions of the likelihood of the risk multiplied by the impact to them should the risk occur, see Figure 2. For the more vulnerable members of the community, in this case the elderly, people with disabilities or poor health were far more vulnerable to negative effects of the disease than the younger members of the community, whereas the far more younger members of the community were economically impacted through loss of jobs, reduction of hours, increased responsibility for continuing education of school-age children.

³ Amount at Stake (AAS) = Likelihood of occurrence (L) multiplied by Impact if Occurred (I). The data is subjective based on conversations with different groups affected. More research will need to be conducted to develop a better understanding of how different groups dealt with the consequences of the pandemic over time.

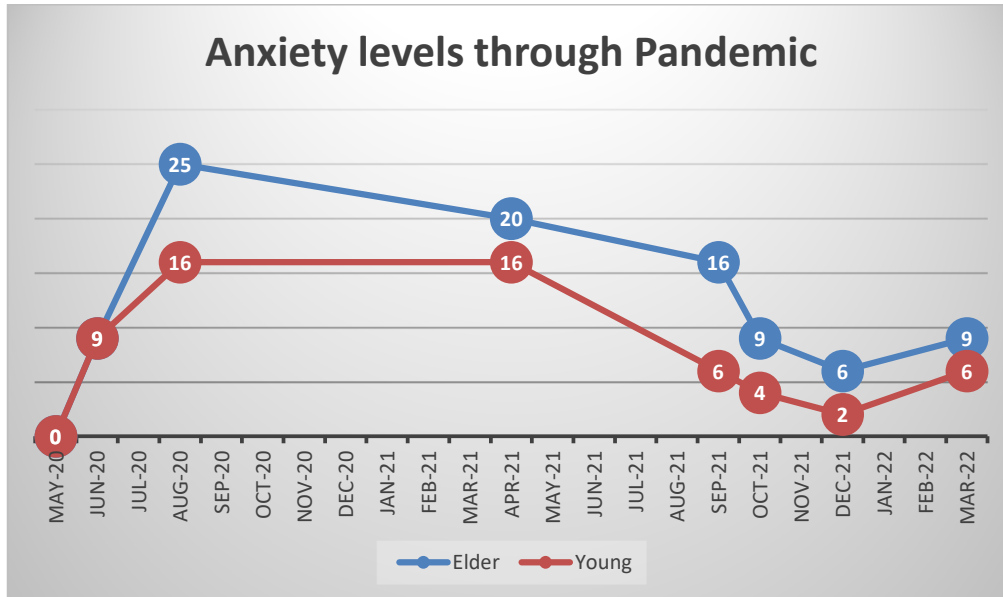


Figure 1: Levels of anxiety through Australia's pandemic (to March 2022)

	Likelihood of occurrence	Impact if occurred
Very low	1	1
Low	2	2
Medium	3	3
High	4	4
Very High	5	5

Figure 2: Scale for measurement of AAS and therefore the trend of anxiety

The Zone of Uncertainty

The Zone of Uncertainty⁴ is the murky area between an organization's view of how to achieve business success and the actual work that delivers value to the organization; this includes project work. In the Zone

⁴ The concept of the Zone of Uncertainty was discussed in Bourne, L. (2015). 'Delivering Organizational Value in the Zone of Uncertainty'. In Wyzalek, J. and Levin, G ed. *Portfolio Management: A Strategic Approach*. CRC Press, Taylor and Francis Group, Baton Rouge. The concept and the illustrations in Figures 3 and 4 have been updated and adapted.

the hopes and dreams of the organization’s strategists collapse under the weight of the complications and complexity of creating value, characterized by a perception of lack of control, lack of certainty, and lack of direction and, right now, disruption and anxiety.

The Optimistic Approach

As part of the regular business planning cycle an organization defines its business strategy for a particular interval. From that strategy emerges clear strategic objectives, which will then be converted into programs, and projects. Expectations are that there is a straightforward path from milestone A to milestone B; all that is needed is the perfect combination of the right approvals, structures, and processes in place (command) and then measures and reporting against those measures (controls). The transition from the business strategy to the output of the project occurs in the Zone.

Zone activities include any aspect of management to ensure that all work:

- Delivers the organization’s strategy in a balanced way,
- Is appropriately funded and resourced,
- Is tracked and controlled to ensure progress (time, cost, and scope) is delivered according to the schedule and any necessary managed adjustments are implemented
- Delivers the benefits outlined in the business case. – the project’s outcomes.

Figure 3 describes the idealized Zone. Clear management direction and defined outcomes are shown as unclouded by culture or unconscious bias, and without any divergence or conflict. Clear transmission of strategic (organizational) visions into tactical (project) objectives ensure that projects will be delivered to the required time, cost, and quality. This view supports the assumption is that there will be a universal agreement from all stakeholders that the chosen path is the best and only path for optimal delivery of value to the organization.



Figure 3: Idealized view of how projects will deliver the organization’s business strategy

Figure 4 shows the more realistic picture of what happens in the Zone. Management’s expectations remain unwavering⁵, but the outcomes are not so predictable. The simple direct line of assumption between the executive’s articulation of strategic objectives, and the project work that is approved and resourced will most likely deviate. The path for delivery is affected by unexpected events, and senior stakeholders and the project team will react to try to regain control of the delivery of the objectives. Often these adjustments cause more disruption within the project and its relationships with other projects.



Figure 4: A more realistic view of the transition from business strategy to project

Within the Zone: complexity, disruption, lack of structure, distortion of time, and anxiety

The work of project management is complicated⁶: and often complex⁷; what makes it complex is the combination of technical and operational complexity along with the web of relationships with the stakeholder community. Symptoms of unpredictability are always present in projects but now with our experiences during the pandemic we can recognise them better, and perhaps remember those feelings of unpredictability and uncertainty as we approach reform of risk processes and practices in the ‘new or emerging normal’ post-pandemic. Symptoms and causes can be some or all of the following:

Disruption: projects and organizations were already experiencing disruption of work and leisure through the changes driven by increasing use of AI, social media, and other uses of technology. the need to change

⁵ Their attention is now on other visions and strategies, believing that the process will automatically proceed without any more senior management intervention.

⁶ Complicated = a large number of interconnected and interdependent parts.

⁷ Project work is complex if it consists of many interdependent parts each of which can change in ways that are not totally predictable and which can then have unpredictable impacts on other elements that are themselves capable of change

modes of working when working from home or providing services and medical support in an environment of physical restrictions intensifies disruption.

Lack of structure: the need to change working and leisure habits means that most regular activities had been curtailed or modified; old habits must be replaced by new habits and new habits take a long time to form.

Distortion of time: enforced restriction of activities also meant that time is distorted. My own experience during Melbourne's many lockdowns was to enforce a strict schedule for other work, exercise, and other activities. This schedule 'filled my day' and it seemed to go faster, while at the same time dragging painfully.

The anxiety: generated by this extreme combination of uncertainty, disruption, lack of structure and distortion of time ebbed and flowed throughout this time as described in Figure 1. Our 'risk appetite' - tolerance of risk - changed throughout the pandemic, over time there was a lower sensitivity to the earlier anxiety and re-emergence of how we live our lives or manage our projects.

Moving on – project life post-pandemic

An understanding of how awareness of the effects of uncertainty (that matters to the project and team) and the 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns' are critical elements of risk identification and risk management. A review of the current risk identification and management processes has revealed that the pre-pandemic processes to manage risk and opportunities in projects are adequate. Attention must be paid, however, on pre-pandemic practices in order to re-define those practices and promote a zeal for managing within uncertain global, community, organizational and project environments.

Post-pandemic risk management

ISO standard ISO 31000:2018(en) – Risk Management ⁸ is an inclusive and comprehensive standard for managing risks in organizations. The guidelines and instructions on how to manage risk include important principles:

- *Managing risk is iterative and assists organizations in setting strategy, achieving objectives and making informed decisions.*
- *Managing risk is part of governance and leadership and is fundamental to how the organization is managed at all levels. It contributes to the improvement of management systems.*
- *Managing risk is part of all activities associated with an organization and includes interaction with stakeholders.*

⁸ ISO Standard for Risk Management 2018: <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:31000:ed-2:v1:en>

- *Managing risk considers the external and internal context of the organization, including human behaviour and cultural factors.*

This Standard forms the basis of most risk management process sets. Generally, project teams will undertake the initial and some key identification and management actions using the templates and guidelines provided by the organization.

Review of the practices however tell a different story. The application of the elements of process are marred by pressure of management to maintain a ‘no frills’ budget and refrain from delivering ‘bad news’, individuals and project teams influenced by Optimism Bias, failure to maintain a watching brief on the identified risks and on emerging risks as conditions change.

Post-pandemic options for reforming risk management practices

Organizations can assist project teams to counter the effects of increased awareness of uncertainty and the anxiety that accompanies it through programs to increase individual and group resilience and adaptability.

Resilience: the ability to recover quickly from an unforeseen event or *the ability of a system to return to its original state after being disturbed*. If resilience is built into the practice, the team and its management can better withstand the consequences of unforeseen risks. Cost cutting will remove resilience. Some ways are that management can build resistance:

- Rehearsals of potential issues based on expert risk assessments, or experience in dealing with issues that can be given back to others in story or process instructions
- Spare capacity in the team, redundancy of skills for important aspects of the work, or access to a resource pool of expertise.
- Ability to trust other team members and understand their capabilities and abilities to work together even in unusual situations.

Adaptability: framing of uncertainties – utilising language, experience, multiple viewpoints with scenarios to cover different eventualities both short-term and longer-term. Long-term planning and reviews are essential to ensure that short-term actions do not compromise longer term strategies.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to explore the reactions to the pandemic as it swept through Australia, and the issues that occurred in the absence of good information and communication to the people. Without information about what was happening, and regular updates to explain government actions, we experienced anxiety as

we tried to make sense of events that we had never encountered before. Anxiety affected us differently, depending on age, access to information and temperament. Anxiety also changed over time.

As we ‘live with COVID’. are organisations prepared to review risk identification and management practices? Will recent history of anxiety connected to dealing with uncertainty help those involved in managing risk develop a new mindset that understands from experience how uncertain times come with personal anxiety. Can management adapt its approaches to dealing with ‘bad news’ reporting of risks and issues? Will the Zone of Uncertainty help organizations and project personnel adapt the practice of risk management to deliver more effective management of the unknowns?

The next paper will discuss organizations, governance, strategic planning and implementation in the ‘new normal’.

About the Author



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Lynda Bourne DPM, FACS is a senior management consultant, professional speaker, teacher and an award-winning project manager with 50 years professional industry experience. She has been focussed on the delivery of stakeholder management and other project related consultancy, mentoring and training for clients world-wide.

She has presented at conferences and seminars in South America, Europe, Russia, Asia, New Zealand and Australia to audiences of industry leaders and project managers in the IT, construction, defence and mining industries and has been keynote speaker at meetings and workshops within organisations in the finance and utilities sector.

In 2010 she was engaged as visiting professor at EAN University, Bogota, Colombia, teaching leadership in the Masters of PM Program for five years.

Most recently she was a member of the Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, lecturing in IT management subjects, in particular, stakeholder management, communication and leadership.

Lynda Bourne has authored the following books:

- *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2009)
- *Project Relationship Management and the Stakeholder Circle: A guide for developing stakeholder management maturity in organisations* (2010)
- *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2011)
- *Making projects and programs work: What really matters for achieving successful project and program outcomes* (2015)

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