GIULIA PAROLA

COLLABORATING IN EUROPEAN PROJECTS

MANY HANDS (DON'T ALWAYS) MAKE LIGHT WORK

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Giulia Parola

*"Life is much too important a thing
ever to talk seriously about it."*

—Oscar Wilde

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FOREWORD

In the wonderful universe of European programs and projects, Giulia Parola reminds us that "collaboration is a skill that needs to be learned." This remarkable book is not just a guide; it is the catalyst for transformative change in this dynamic landscape. With clarity and precision, and including important practices, it equips readers with the knowledge and tools needed to harness the full potential of the complex European ecosystem, emerging as an indispensable compass for project managers and designers seeking innovative pathways.

One shining example within this book is the project StayOn, funded by the EEA & Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. This project, like so many others, found its strength and direction in the lessons and strategies elucidated within these pages. The transformation of StayOn into a dynamic and impactful force serves as a testament to how collaboration can significantly extend the reach and enhance the effectiveness of European-funded initiatives.

In a rapidly evolving context, this book serves as a testament to the enduring power of collaboration and shines as a beacon of hope for all European project managers and designers striving to make a meaningful impact. I wholeheartedly recommend this book as a must-read for all those navigating the intricacies of the European projects ecosystem, aiming to create meaningful social

value. Just as StayOn exemplifies, your project too could become a luminous star in this unparalleled cross-border universe.

—Gian Luca Bombarda, *Director of the EEA & Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment*

PREFACE

Back in 2018, when I applied for my first job as a researcher and project manager on a European project, I had to google what the acronym EEA and the word grant meant. I got the job, but the googling didn't stop there. In the initial days of my new position, I had to figure out what a consortium is and what transnational partnership projects are, as I was part of one. My boss shared the project proposal, which was a 115-page document with pages 60 to 111 filled with tables and numbers—my least favorite things. I felt lost and unsure how to navigate through it all.

I quickly realized I couldn't possibly be the only one with this job, and, although Google became my main ally, most of the information I found online was scattered and not quite what I needed. American-based websites offered definitions that didn't seem to align with the common terminology used in European projects, making it even more confusing. It took a few months and many virtual meetings with fake nods and smiles from my side, jotting down notes while pretending to understand. Eventually, I started to grasp it all and lived happily ever after—until my first-ever transnational project meeting.

To be honest, that's when the real trouble kicked in. It was both fun and incredibly frustrating. I won't go into the details of what happened when I suggested setting up control groups to measure

the project's impact, but let's just say there was a lot of tension and a fridge involved.* What I want to highlight is that working with the other project partners became the most challenging and rewarding aspect of my job. But how hard can it really be? Very. And that's why I wrote this book.

First of all, I want to save you from spending as much time on Google as I did (it's my turf!). This book covers everything I wish I had known when I started as a European project manager—at least the essentials. Secondly, I want to share all the knowledge I've gathered from research, fellow European project managers, and my own experience, especially when it comes to building and sustaining successful collaborations because, believe me, that's a tough nut to crack.

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* If you do want to learn more about the mysterious fridge, I recommend reading the introduction of a paper I have written with my colleagues: Parola, G., Spiess-Knafl, W., & Thaler, J. (2022). The butterfly effect: How academics and practitioners' micro-practices shape turning points in response to paradox. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 21(3), 369–393. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2021.0235. If you are struggling to get hold of the paper, you might want to check out this shorter magazine article: Parola, G. (2020, March). The fridge. The Youth Employment Magazine, 18–19. https://youthemploymentmag.net/2020/04/03/the-fridge/

SANDCASTLES IN THE SAND

[After things have taken an intense turn as SpongeBob and Patrick engage in an all-out battle, using their sand creations to wage war against each other]

SpongeBob: I'll tell you what happened, Patrick…
I got carried away.

Patrick: Me, too…was it worth it?

SpongeBob: No, no, it wasn't. What started out as a fun dream turned into a horrible, brutal, nightmare. As the winds of time changed the silvery sands of these dunes to a new landscape, so let us hope that our own winds of change will change our spiritual dunes to a landscape of peace. Oh buddy, let's never forget this lesson. *[SpongeBob and Patrick hug]*[1]

How many times were we encouraged, as KIDS, TO SHARE OUR TOYS? There are also numerous nursery rhymes on YouTube teaching children how to share and play together. Let me clue you in on something: they are not a hit.

Putting the music aside, how often did our moms and dads utter sentences like, "Come on, don't be shy. See that kid over there? He is building a sandcastle; lend him one of your shovels and go play with him!" Besides trying to get rid of us to enjoy a coffee on the beach and finish the crosswords, I believe that our parents were genuinely trying to nurture collaboration in all of us. This is not without reason.

Over two million years during the Stone Age, the evolutionary selection among early humans has endowed us with remarkable intelligence and a profound capacity for empathy and collective action. Looking back at least one million years ago, there is evidence of widespread collaboration in hunting, food sharing, and the safeguarding of vulnerable individuals. It seems that in Stone Age societies, characterized by small groups, the bonds of deep care and concerted efforts played a crucial role in ensuring survival.[2]

This book, however, will show you that collaboration is no good. Nah—just kidding. Be warned, I am only the 'right' amount of controversial.

Actually, also in the modern world of work, collaboration—when done right—equals better performance. To give an example from the private sector, research demonstrates that real gains in business are achievable when supply chain collaborative

partners establish trust and collaborate long-term to create mutually beneficial decisions and plans.[3]

In the public and third sectors, despite the potential costs in terms of power, time, conflict, stress, process, suboptimal outcomes, and resources, the perceived positive correlation between collaboration and performance serves as the primary driving force for engaging in collaborative arrangements.[4]

Also, if collaboration is set up within a defined timeline, research shows that when individuals trust one another and collaborate effectively on projects, it enhances the likelihood of achieving success in terms of time, cost, and quality. Moreover, this success extends beyond objective measures and encompasses the perception of success by all project stakeholders, considering project performance in terms of knowledge integration, and innovation.[5]

If collaborating is so good—then how come that little kid who was happily playing on the beach is now crying alone in a sand hole? The fact of the matter is that collaboration is a difficult beast to tame and even though it has been part of our evolutionary success, it is a skill that needs to be learned. To get better at it, this book will introduce you to the idea of building and sustaining successful collaborations through an approach that is specific in context and purpose, structured, and based on solid evidence.

What is different about this book

The specific context and purpose

There are many books about the topic of collaboration, but none reflect the uniqueness of the European projects ecosystem. European public investments in a wide range of areas, including research and innovation, education, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, cultural heritage, and more are channeled through programs that thrive on cross-border collaborative projects, setting them apart as a unique system worldwide.

These collaborative initiatives have a temporary character and typically involve project managers from diverse organizations, spanning multiple countries and sectors, coming together as a team to pursue a shared objective. Ultimately, these collaborations occur within the broader framework of fortifying European unity, aiming to contribute to the process of European integration. Given this exceptional context, specific measures are required to address the unique challenges and opportunities they present.

Nevertheless, this book is not a Swiss army knife. It has a very specific purpose only: to guide you—the readers—on building and sustaining successful collaborations in European projects. While I have acknowledged the impact of collaboration on performance earlier, I will focus on highlighting practices that have proven effective in establishing and nurturing collaboration within European projects without examining their effects on the projects' results.

The book's specific purpose also aligns with its targeted audience. I believe two main groups will gain the most from it: those

who are (or aspire to be) European project designers and managers. The latter group encompasses a variety of functions including project coordinators, impact managers, and culture managers—a role I aim to emphasize as crucial for successful collaborations within European projects through the pages of this book.

The structured approach

Considering that European projects often extend over several years and sometimes veer off track from their original purpose—European integration, it is surprising how little time European project managers spend thinking about the quality and nature of relationships within their project teams, despite their crucial importance. Instead, they often rely on intuition and practical experience to manage these collaborative initiatives.

Rather than discussing collaboration in a vague manner, this book takes a systematic approach by breaking down the different practices that can help European project managers build and sustain successful collaborations over time and it provides practical tools associated with these practices. The aim is to help you think critically and strategically about collaboration, filling the void in knowledge and offering tangible guidance.

In this context, the systematic approach can also prove valuable for project designers, as they are the ones who often establish the project framework before the projects even commence.

The evidence that backs it up

This book introduces the only academic research conducted on managing collaboration within European projects, which adds significant value to its content. The main ideas presented in this book are based on the following sources.

Firstly, this book draws upon an academic article I co-authored and published in the peer-reviewed journal *Academy of Management Learning & Education*. In this work, which relies on cross-sectional data, we used a comparative case study approach and explored the relationships among managers in six European projects through 34 semi-structured interviews conducted during the second year of their joint work in a social program.

Secondly, it is supported by quantitative and qualitative data collected longitudinally from project managers over a two-year period in a project called StayOn, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment.*

Additionally, throughout the book, I use additional data obtained from surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted with various managers involved in European projects on a number of topics, including the benefits and pitfalls of such initiatives and their impact. In some sections, I refer to secondary sources, namely scholars who have examined themes relevant to our context.

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* Here is the project website link: www.stay-on.eu, and here is a link to the fund's website: www.eeagrants.org

Lastly, some aspects discussed in this book are based on my professional experience as a European project manager. I acknowledge that—although I love to be right all the time—these perspectives are not universally applicable truths. So, I make it clear when I present opinions and rely solely on anecdotal evidence.

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A chapter-by-chapter overview

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the book that should interest you enough to continue reading the rest. Within these opening pages, I have elucidated the distinctive qualities that set this book apart from others, while also providing a concise overview of the subsequent chapters that await you.

Chapter 2 takes a momentary step back to gain a broader perspective on the European projects ecosystem. Within this chapter, I explain what funds, grants, tenders, and transnational partnership projects are. Furthermore, I explore the process of building consortia and briefly discuss the commercial opportunities that abound within this thriving ecosystem.

Chapter 3 considers the benefits that arise from engaging in European projects, as well as the challenges that may accompany them. Also, it examines our current understanding of their management. This and the previous chapter are a sort of survival manual for novice project designers and managers who are not yet very familiar with the ecosystem of European projects and their management.

Chapter 4 serves as the core of this book, providing a comprehensive breakdown of the essential practices required to establish and maintain successful collaborations. If you are an experienced project designer or manager and find yourself with little time for beach reads, Chapter 4 is unequivocally the one to prioritize.

Chapter 5 enables an understanding of how integrating the practices outlined in the previous chapter can shape the collaboration lifecycle of a project. Additionally, it describes the roles and responsibilities required for their successful implementation.

Finally, **Chapter 6** offers advice on how individuals, groups, and institutions can take action to enhance collaboration in European projects.

I wrote this book to support you, myself, and others like us in becoming better project designers and managers.

My hope is that, in your present and future project endeavors, you will begin to notice chances to embed practices that build and sustain successful collaborations. By doing so, you will enjoy your job more and make a more impactful contribution toward achieving the social objectives of European projects. It is not always going to be easy but it is absolutely worth the effort.

Now, remember to always encourage your child to build castles in the sand with others and enjoy the read.

Chapter 1: SANDCASTLES IN THE SAND

[1] Alexander, C. (Writer, director), Cervas, Z. (Writer, director), & Michaeli, D. (Writer). (2009, March 16). Sand castles in the sand (Season 6, Episode 121a) [TV series episode]. In S. Hillenburg, P. Tibbitt, M. Ceccarelli, W. Waller (Executive Producers), SpongeBob SquarePants. United Plankton Pictures, Nickelodeon Animation Studio.

[2] Spikins, P. (2013). The Stone Age origins of autism. In M. Fitzgerald (Ed.), Recent advances in autism spectrum disorders - Volume II. Essay, IntechOpen.

[3] Daugherty, P. J., Richey, R. G., Roath, A. S., Min, S., Chen, H., Arndt, A. D., & Genchev, S. E. (2006). Is collaboration paying off for firms? Business Horizons, 49(1), 61–70. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2005.06.002

[4] Mitchell, G. E., O'Leary, R., & Gerard, C. (2015). Collaboration and performance: Perspectives from public managers and NGO leaders. Public Performance & Management Review, 38(4), 684–716. https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2015.103 1015

[5] Bond-Barnard, T. J., Fletcher, L., & Steyn, H. (2018). Linking trust and collaboration in project teams to project management success. International Journal of Managing Projects in Business, 11(2), 432–457. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMPB-06-2017-0068

THE ECOSYSTEM OF EUROPEAN PROJECTS

The Pampas of South America are fertile plains inhabited by a variety of animals, including the maned wolf, the greater rhea, and the giant anteater. The Pampas are also used for cattle ranching, so domesticated animals such as European project designers and managers can be found in the area.

FUNDING AVAILABLE FOR EUROPEAN PROJECTS IS CONFUSING. Trying to get a full overview of what I call the "ecosystem of European projects" by diligently Google-searching is a quick and easy recipe for a free headache. Trust me, I have tried. I then turned to ChatGPT hoping for the best but she (it is definitely a she) seems to be more confused than me and Google.

The European Union (EU) is a unique political and economic union of 27 European countries with over 446 million inhabitants who speak different languages, practice different religions and have unique customs and traditions (in Corfu, Greece, people throw pottery out of windows for Easter and in Denmark, on the Saturday of the Roskilde Festival, organizers set a naked run around the campsite, just sayin').

There is no exact equivalent to the EU in other parts of the world. However, regional organizations and alliances in different regions around the globe share some similarities with the EU in promoting cooperation and integration among member states. Yet, it seems that the European Union really went the extra mile to promote integration through such a wide variety of programs that it can indeed give any beginner in the field (or expert, really) the free headache I mentioned earlier.

Before we delve into the intricacies of European projects, let us get a few fun essentials straight.

A few things you should know first

Funds, grants, and tenders

I have heard the terms "European funds" and "grants" or "tenders" being used interchangeably, but they actually refer to quite different things:

- "European funds" generally refer to the various financial instruments and resources available at the European Union level, such as the European Union's Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). The latter includes the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). These are designed to support a wide range of European projects and initiatives, such as infrastructure development, social inclusion programs, research and innovation, and environmental sustainability. Unfortunately, the program names tend to switch around a lot, making it a pain to keep up sometimes. Some countries outside the European Union can apply for EU funding and tender opportunities depending on the specific program or fund.

For example, the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) provides funding for the EU's neighbors to the east and south, including countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Other programs, such as Horizon Europe, may allow for participation from third countries under certain conditions. Additionally, some funding opportunities may be open to countries that have signed specific agreements or partnerships with the EU.

- "Grants" typically refer to financial support awarded to individuals, single organizations, and institutions or groups thereof to carry out specific projects or activities that align with certain policy objectives or priorities. Grants may be awarded through the ESIF, as well as other EU programs and initiatives. All grants are nonprofit funding opportunities. Besides being nonprofit, grants usually require co-funding, meaning that part of the costs will be borne by the grant beneficiary and not entirely by the funding body. In the case of the EU, grants may be disbursed directly by the European Commission, national, or regional authorities, or other intermediary bodies designated by the EU (or even from authorities outside of the EU).

- "Tenders" and procurement involve the acquisition of goods and services. Regarding the European Union's context, when the EU needs to purchase a specific good or service— studies, technical assistance and training, consultancy, conference and publicity services, books, and IT equipment—it invites potential suppliers or contractors (from an organization or institution or a group thereof) to submit bids or proposals for the provision of goods, services, or works.

When it comes to EU funding, there is an official portal that provides information on all calls and tenders from the EU Commission.* However, for beginners, the system may appear somewhat daunting to navigate.

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* Here is the link to the portal: www.ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home

Certain private consultancy companies have taken advantage of the complex nature of the system and have created independent platforms that offer valuable information about European projects and available funding opportunities.

One such company is Enspire Science Ltd., based in Israel, which specializes in research funding and serves as a training service provider. With extensive expertise in EU research funding, the organization supports research institutions, hospitals, and technology companies in maximizing the potential of their research projects. Their website gathers a vast knowledge base on EU-funded research programs, along with a range of resources and articles.

An additional example can be found in the recently established online consulting firm and its affiliated platform, EU Funds Simply Explained. This company specializes in the management of grants provided by the European Union. Their primary objective is to simplify the intricacies of European funds. Alongside offering free information in a convenient Q&A format on its website, the firm provides tailored support services for both pre- and post-award phases to various types of organizations.

Let us make all this a tiny bit more complicated, shall we? The European Union is the EU's main funding body, but it is not the only one interested in financially supporting EU member states. Hence, European projects are not necessarily EU-funded. As per the insights of an experienced project manager overseeing an Italian NGO, we can uncover other funds supporting

European countries in what she calls the Pampas—the expansive plains that lie beyond the realms of better-known EU funds.

In the Pampas, funds are more scattered and obscure to the European project designers and managers, who more rarely venture into these uncharted territories. Here, one can come across grants from the World Bank and other various international organizations or the EEA & Norway Grants, among others.

The EEA (European Economic Area) Grants and Norway Grants are a separate funding mechanism from the EU Structural and Investment Funds. They are financial contributions from Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway to contribute to a more equal Europe, both socially and economically and to strengthen the relations between Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, and the 15 beneficiary states in Europe. The funds are managed by separate entities—the Financial Mechanism Office for the EEA Grants and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Norway Grants.

Zooming in: Roles in transnational partnership projects

The European Union and other funding mechanisms often have a particular emphasis on cross-border cooperation and integration, an aspect that is reflected in the design and management of European projects. These are usually implemented through transnational partnership projects, namely collaborative initiatives that typically involve organizations from different countries and sectors coming together in the form of a consortium to work toward a shared objective within a defined timeline.

These projects require the participation of multiple organizations—known as project partners—who collaborate by pooling their resources, expertise, and efforts. The number of organizations in a consortium can vary depending on the funding body and program, ranging from two or three to 15, on average.

Securing a grant or winning a tender through a proposal is the key to participation in transnational partnership projects. The project proposal usually consists of a detailed document outlining the project idea. For EU funding, specific templates provided by the funding programs are used. Similarly, when seeking grants from other funding sources, standardized templates are available to simplify the evaluation process. After submitting the proposal, one must wait for months to receive the evaluation results. If the project gets selected, then it can proceed to implementation.

Therefore, within the ecosystem of European projects, two pivotal roles emerge. The role of the project designer encompasses the responsibility for crafting a project idea, building a consortium, writing and submitting the project proposal—essentially, everything before the project becomes a reality. In contrast, the role of the project manager acquires significance only upon the realization of a successful project proposal, when the project secures the opportunity to materialize.

These roles occasionally interlace, particularly when project designers draft and submit proposals with the ultimate ambition of actively shepherding the project as managers on behalf of their organization, which, surely enough, is one of the project partners.

Nevertheless, some project designers—either firms or freelance consultants which I call "project proposal whisperers"—opt to

concentrate solely on proposal writing rather than project management. Consequently, they usually extend their services to enterprises seeking public funding; we will discuss them more in-depth later in this chapter. It is worth noting that not all project managers assume the role of project designers in the traditional sense, potentially steering projects that they did not write.

Much like Christian Grey, the role of project managers can encompass a variety of shades, and not all individuals find the same types of roles equally enjoyable… Returning to the point, the diversity of project managers is rooted in the distinctive character of European projects and the pivotal role their organizations play within them. Discussing all of these roles would exceed the boundaries of this book. However, I firmly believe that the functions covered by three roles—project coordinator, impact and culture manager—are essential and should be present in virtually every project, regardless of its subject matter or scale.

In a consortium, a project partner—usually known as lead partner or lead applicant—assumes the responsibility of coordinating and overseeing the project activities, typically taking on managerial and administrative tasks at the project level on behalf of the consortium. This role is performed by an individual, the project coordinator. Frequently, the latter is subtly tasked with the duty of establishing and sustaining collaboration within the project. Consequently, there are instances where the role of a project coordinator intersects with that of a culture manager, whose primary responsibility is building and sustaining a successful collaboration by understanding what binds a group together and acting on it. In Chapter 5 of this book, I will delve into the benefits and challenges of this scenario.

Finally, an impact manager oversees the process of measuring and assessing the impact of the project in order to improve it and enhance the capacity of project partners to measure, evaluate, and manage the effects they have on their target groups.
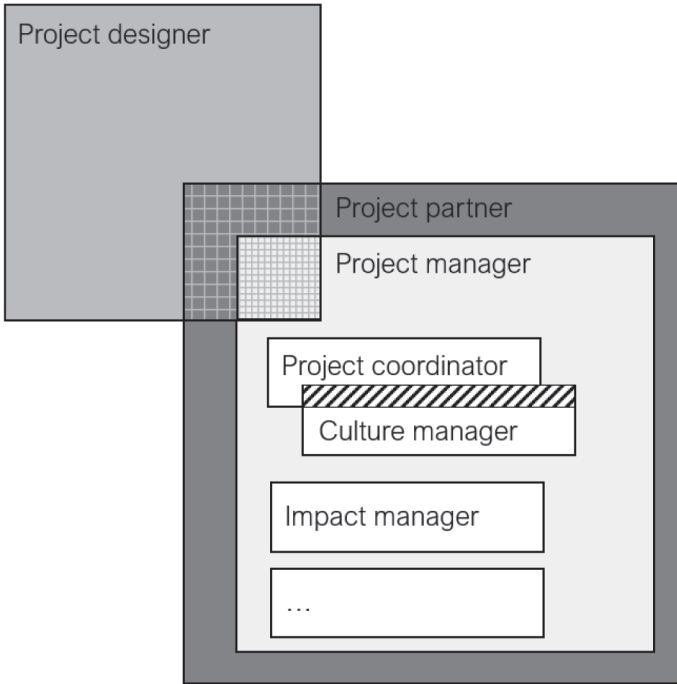
Roles in transnational partnership projects.

In European projects, team members are geographically separated and nowadays communicate primarily through technology rather than in-person interactions. Depending on the specific funding program and project, collaborators may have opportunities to meet in person during workshops and conferences. These social events are usually organized and hosted by one or more partner organizations involved in the project.

In many instances, already at the proposal writing stage, transnational partnership projects face at least one challenge that has been encountered by countless teams throughout history: the curse of "free riders" (namely individuals or entities that benefit from the project resources without contributing their fair share). In more traditional face-to-face teams, strong personal connections and shared experiences naturally develop, fostering mutual obligations and discouraging free riding.

However, dispersed teams encounter obstacles due to their distance and lack of direct interaction, weakening the social bonds that prevent free-riding behavior, thus free riding might occur already in the early stages of team development and frequently results in lower levels of performance.

Naturally, engaging in free riding may carry consequences, such as exclusion from invitations to participate in new project proposals within the same consortium. However, at present, this appears to be the only mechanism in place to address this issue. To the best of my knowledge, there is no official whistleblowing system established at the EU level or within other funding bodies. Although I am uncertain whether this would be an appropriate solution, it does seem inequitable that free riders can benefit from years of funding before their reputation makes it difficult to join further consortia. One potential solution could involve embracing online review platforms, using them to foster trust within the European project community and warning potential partners of uncooperative behavior early on.

The subtle art of building a consortium

So, how can one build a winning consortium for a transnational partnership project? Well, it depends. Some say it is an art while looking knowingly off into the distance (avoid them, they will not help you). For others, it is a vocation and a way to earn a living. This group of people includes a rather wide variety of professionals spanning from public-funding specialists to networking strategists that I call "connectors". They excel at what they do best: building connections. Connectors invest a great amount of their time in making introductions between organizations, know who the gatekeepers are, and can provide you with the right contacts when needed. For the majority, however, building a consortium for a transnational partnership project simply belongs to the European project designer's and project manager's skill set.

Project designers and managers mostly acquire the knowledge of building consortia through self-learning. When the need arises, they leverage the trustworthy informal networks they have established through long-term experience in the ecosystem of European projects to identify individuals or organizations possessing the necessary expertise and resources to contribute to the project.

By starting the search for partners from within their established informal networks, project designers and managers can skip the step of evaluating consortium members' track record, reputation, and commitment since they possess this information from past collaborations. Niels Tudor-Vinther, the creator of *The Grant* podcast, refers to this process as "grabbing the low-hanging fruit first."

Depending on the funding mechanism and program in question, project designers and managers will follow at least some of the following rules of thumb:

- The consortium members meet the eligibility criteria
- The consortium members align with the project's goals and objectives
- The consortium members have complementary skills and expertise
- The consortium is geographically distributed in a meaningful and extensive manner
- The consortium offers a suitable blend of NGOs, for-profit entities, public organizations, academia, and other relevant stakeholders.

Yet, most European project designers and managers are—as far as I know and contrary to what is written in this chapter's epigraph—human beings. As a result, even within their reliable informal network, they may find themselves partnering with individuals or organizations they personally favor, even if they may not be the most efficient or effective choice.

If their existing networks fail to offer suitable candidates for the desired consortium, project designers and managers may seek recommendations from within their extended network to identify potential project partners.

Various factors, including the proximity of the call for proposals or invitation for tenders deadline, will naturally impact their decision-making process. Additionally, the sequence in which

they address the aforementioned questions will influence the likelihood of encountering unexpected challenges during the process of putting together a consortium.

An exclusive club?

With all that being said, one might rightly wonder if European projects have become somewhat of an exclusive club, where funding is awarded to the usual suspects. Given the fact that many project designers and managers rely on their existing networks to build consortia, then the answer is—at least partly—yes. However, this does not tell the whole story and organizations that are new to this field can still become part of this consortia through extended invitations, matchmaking events, and partner search platforms.

However, firstly, let us acknowledge that relying on your trustworthy network when forming a consortium makes sense. Why would you reach out to someone you do not know and have never worked with before—basically, someone you do not trust—when you have a perfectly suitable partner just a WhatsApp message away? This is especially true considering that, if everything goes well and your proposal gets selected, you will find yourself working with that project partner for years to come (Y-E-A-R-S, I cannot stress this enough!).

Secondly, it is important to highlight that good project designers and managers often possess wide and diversified informal networks. They understand the value of having a large pool of potential project partners at their disposal, allowing them to satisfy their consortia's specific needs. In this sense, the notion of an exclusive club becomes less significant. The expansive

informal networks of skilled project designers and managers enable them to tap into various sectors, industries, and professional circles, thus broadening the range of potential partners they can consider.

Nevertheless, despite the size of this club, we must acknowledge that it functions as such—a rather closely connected community. When project designers and managers primarily rely on their existing informal network for partner selection, there is a risk of limited exposure to new perspectives and approaches. By predominantly engaging with familiar partners, there is a higher likelihood of recycling previous ideas and strategies, potentially limiting the potential for innovation.

Moreover, the exclusive nature of the club may create a barrier for new collaborations to emerge. While established relationships can be advantageous in terms of efficiency and familiarity, they can also inadvertently limit the formation of new partnerships. The tendency to gravitate toward known entities can inadvertently restrict the exploration of untapped potential and prevent the formation of dynamic collaborations that could lead to more transformative outcomes. This could either work in favor of or against the consortium during the project proposal assessment phase. Evaluators typically prioritize either efficiency or innovation, but seldom both to the same degree.

The new girl in town

With this in mind, the European Union has introduced calls for proposals targeting "newcomers." These entities refer to organizations that have not previously received funding from a specific program or have not been funded by European funds in general.

For example, within Erasmus Plus—the EU's flagship program—there are now Small-scale Partnerships, a new project format designed to facilitate access to the Erasmus Plus program for smaller institutions and hard-to-reach target groups.

Newcomers can bring a fresh perspective, increased diversity, and new opportunities for collaboration and growth, contributing to more dynamic European projects. For organizations that are new to European projects, entering the scene can be challenging due to the competitive nature of funding programs. Therefore, welcoming newcomers also increases the chances of accessing public funding for organizations with little or no experience in this domain.

According to the European Commission (EC), the number of newcomers could serve as a performance indicator to gauge efforts aimed at promoting wider participation in the EU programs. However, the EC also cautions that determining whether allocating a significant portion of funding to newcomers would optimize the program's impact is a challenging task, as it is difficult to predict in advance the precise impact and outcomes of such an approach.[1]

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The monetization of European projects

Geographies of European projects

Countries that face significant economic and social challenges, such as high unemployment rates, low GDP per capita, or limited levels of innovation and competitiveness, may be eligible

for more funding than those with stronger economies and social structures. In general, however, the process of acquiring grants and winning tenders is highly competitive in nature.

Due to the vast scope of European projects, it is a challenge to monitor the track records of European countries in terms of proposal development, success rates, and project implementations. Nonetheless, some programs do provide this type of data, which is often intriguing to analyze. For example, an assessment of Horizon 2020—the EU's research and innovation program 2014-2020—highlights notable regional disparities in research funding distribution, emphasizing a persistent gap between European Eastern and Western regions, often referred to as the "innovation gap."[2]

Specifically, several EU-13 nations—primarily former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, alongside smaller states like Cyprus and Malta—encountered difficulties in catching up. The primary beneficiaries of Horizon 2020 were all to be found in Western Europe. Within this group, Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria, and the Netherlands boasted success rates exceeding 16%, against EU-27 averages of 14%. Hence, Belgium, despite having a population less than double that of Bulgaria, acquired over twenty times the funds.[3]

EU Member States	Net EU Contribution*	% (of total)	Participation	% (of total)	Success Rate Proposals
Germany	€ 10.129.227.933,98	14,9%	22.401	12,2%	14,92%
United Kingdom**	€ 7.841.213.556,28	11,6%	18.466	10,1%	15,29%
France	€ 7.442.417.370,23	11,0%	18.413	10,1%	15,23%
Spain	€ 6.380.754.743,58	9,4%	19.971	10,9%	12,86%
Italy	€ 5.705.222.287,56	8,4%	18.009	9,8%	11,76%
Netherlands	€ 5.377.702.280,98	7,9%	12.178	6,7%	16,00%
Belgium	€ 3.392.228.245,36	5,0%	8.838	4,8%	17,22%
Sweden	€ 2.316.107.046,38	3,4%	5.844	3,2%	14,59%
Austria	€ 1.957.262.084,95	2,9%	5.497	3,0%	16,02%
Denmark	€ 1.761.763.741,07	2,6%	4.471	2,4%	15,11%
Greece	€ 1.722.706.277,71	2,5%	5.653	3,1%	13,44%
Finland	€ 1.536.029.300,44	2,3%	3.847	2,1%	13,12%
Ireland	€ 1.203.041.429,01	1,8%	3.038	1,7%	14,73%
Portugal	€ 1.154.848.210,07	1,7%	4.232	2,3%	13,01%
Poland	€ 742.743.999,35	1,1%	3.153	1,7%	12,71%
Czechia	€ 512.232.987,26	0,8%	2.077	1,1%	15,23%
Slovenia	€ 378.561.570,54	0,6%	1.592	0,9%	11,85%
Hungary	€ 369.300.705,46	0,5%	1.706	0,9%	12,38%
Cyprus	€ 318.875.703,61	0,5%	1.051	0,6%	13,37%
Romania	€ 300.932.171,94	0,4%	1.750	1,0%	12,10%
Estonia	€ 274.499.414,19	0,4%	940	0,5%	13,38%
Luxembourg	€ 201.509.982,62	0,3%	652	0,4%	16,38%
Bulgaria	€ 161.722.791,69	0,2%	1.030	0,6%	11,14%
Croatia	€ 137.852.038,33	0,2%	866	0,5%	13,82%
Slovakia	€ 136.702.179,14	0,2%	728	0,4%	13,34%
Latvia	€ 116.525.293,10	0,2%	578	0,3%	14,17%
Lithuania	€ 95.368.570,09	0,1%	668	0,4%	14,05%
Malta	€ 37.372.802,98	0,1%	282	0,2%	12,31%
Top Associated Countries	Net EU Contribution*	% (of total)	Participation	% (of total)	Success Rate Proposals
Switzerland	€ 2.427.537.097,08	3,6%	5.887	3,2%	17,44%
Norway	€ 1.710.658.968,14	2,5%	3.526	1,9%	15,87%
Israel	€ 1.279.594.274,79	1,9%	2.105	1,2%	12,37%

Horizon 2020 Member States and top
Associated Countries by net EU contribution.[3]

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* Net EU contributions, participation, and success rate proposals are defined in the Glossary of this book.
** The United Kingdom became an Associated Country only in 2021.

The former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe face challenges specifically in competing with stronger nations for grants and talent. David Smith, the head of Croatia's largest public research institute, has highlighted the capacity limitations hindering their ability to succeed in this regard. These patterns appear to be linked to consortia boasting extensive experience and reputation. They tend to involve a substantial share of Western European partners, including a higher proportion of companies over universities.[4] Nevertheless, recent research suggests that cultural factors might also play a role in explaining these patterns.[5]

To address this issue, Horizon 2020 allocated €1 billion specifically to enhance scientists' research capacity in the EU's regions with lower research intensity. This funding was intended to support and enable these regions to compete more effectively for research funding opportunities.[6]

However, the outcomes of EU-driven initiatives aimed at fostering participation from countries less involved in Research and Innovation Framework Programmes, collectively known as Widening actions, have yielded mixed results.[7] Additionally, the Coimbra Group of European universities has emphasized the potential downsides of singling out countries for these actions. They warn against viewing partnerships with Widening countries as extraordinary, suggesting that these countries should be seen as standard collaborators.[8]

It appears that the EEA & Norway Grants during the 2014-2021 funding period have addressed this imbalance in a similar way by limiting eligible lead partners to 15 countries*. This eligibility criterion closely mirrors the criteria established for the EU Cohesion Fund, targeting member states with gross national incomes below 90% of the EU average.

Given what is a stake—Horizon 2020's successor alone (Horizon Europe) has a budget of €95.5 billion (gasp!)—it is not surprising that various processes within the European projects ecosystem, including proposal writing, consortia building, and project management learning, have evolved into commercial opportunities.

Project proposal whisperers (a.k.a. outsourcing the writing process)

There is a thriving industry of firms and consultants acting as project designers that cater specifically to the needs of organizations seeking funding through participation in European projects. They specialize in writing project proposals, particularly for grant applications. They can provide expertise in identifying potential funding sources, researching and understanding the requirements of funding programs, designing projects, and writing and submitting applications on behalf of organizations.

Some of them may also provide additional services, such as project management, evaluation, and reporting.

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* Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

These services can be particularly valuable for organizations with a limited staff to dedicate to the grant application process. Firstly, they represent value-added in terms of new opportunities. Their in-depth knowledge of funding programs might lead less expert project managers to learn about new funding opportunities or networks. Secondly, grant-writing firms and consultants offer comprehensive writing services throughout the grant application process. They assist organizations in formulating clear and concise project narratives and developing realistic budgets, thus increasing the chances of success.

While grant-writing firms can provide valuable assistance in crafting project proposals, there is a risk of limited team growth in terms of developing internal skills such as the capability to discern genuine issues and inventive solutions, aptitude to assemble good collaborators, and proficiency in crafting a project proposal with clarity. If organizations heavily rely on external firms for grant writing, their own project designers and managers may miss out on the opportunity to enhance their skills and gain firsthand experience in the grant application process. This dependence on external firms can hinder the growth and capacity-building of the organization's internal team, limiting their ability to independently pursue future funding opportunities.

Another disadvantage of grant-writing firms is the associated cost, of course. Hiring a professional grant-writing firm can be expensive, especially for organizations with limited financial resources. Grant-writing firms typically charge a fee for their services, which can vary based on the complexity and scope of the project. This cost can add up, particularly if organizations

require ongoing assistance or support for multiple grant applications. For smaller organizations or those with budget constraints, the cost of hiring a grant-writing firm may not be feasible or justifiable in relation to the potential funding secured.

Pairing an external grant-writing firm with internal staff that has the time and skills to learn can be a pathway to fostering the development of internal resources, while also leveraging expertise and professionalism, especially when taking initial steps within the ecosystem of European projects.

Additionally, in the last couple of years, AI technology has been reshaping the landscape of grant writing, primarily by significantly improving efficiency, although it is not poised to entirely replace the role of grant writers. The utilization of AI-powered tools like ChatGPT is increasingly becoming a necessity. Those who embrace this collaboration are likely to find themselves more efficient and effective, while those who resist may risk falling behind in the ever-evolving field of grant writing.

In this vein, a range of courses is now accessible to individuals keen on acquiring the skills to utilize ChatGPT for crafting proposals.

An example of such courses is offered by Kristjan Zemljic, co-founder of Global Disruption, a Slovenian consulting firm that assists innovative teams in securing EU funding. The training program 'ChatGPT in Grant Writing' equips professionals with techniques for securing grants and funding.

The course leverages Kristjan's extensive EU funding experience since 2003 and has been field-tested by over 50 organizations from the EU and beyond, including prestigious universities, accelerators, hi-tech, and deep-tech companies, consultants, and forward-thinking entrepreneurs.

Maximizing funding opportunities through formal networks

There are, of course, other ways to maximize funding opportunities. One of these is "formal networks." These networks, whether legally formalized or not, typically operate under a set of protocols that establish their governance and rules. Their primary objective is to facilitate and support business cooperation among organizations interested in acquiring funding for collaborative projects.

Formal networks often operate on an invitation-only basis, with promoters extending invitations to reliable organizations—the cool kids—that demonstrate an interest in collaborating. While there may or may not be a membership fee, the level of involvement and services provided can vary depending on the specific agreement. Annual events organized by these networks offer member organizations an opportunity to meet face-to-face, present project ideas, and establish consortia. In some cases, a steering committee serves as the primary decision-making body within the network, ensuring efficient coordination and strategic direction.

An example of a formal network is the recently established EuroNordic Network & Cooperative (ENN), a Norwegian nonprofit organization governed by its members. According to their website, ENN aims to facilitate cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders from Europe, EEA, Nordic countries, and Ukraine by fostering long-term partnerships and seamless collaboration, driving large-scale projects, and creating positive societal outcomes.

Formal networks play a crucial role in fostering collaboration and enhancing the chances of securing funding by exponentially increasing the number of project proposals an organization operating alone can submit.

Although invitations to these networks may seem like golden tickets to funding wonderland, my own experience suggests that formal networks can encounter similar challenges as their informal counterparts: exclusivity and lack of innovation at the expense of fresh ideas and perspectives.

So, to network or not to network? I recommend opting for the former, and the rationale lies in what the chapter's title implies: this is an ecosystem and, as such, it is made of many moving parts interacting together. However, I also propose contemplating this strategically. Weigh the pros and cons of your networking endeavors and ensure they align with both your personal interests and those of your organization.

European project designers' and managers' must-haves

If you take stock and pause for just a moment to think about all the aspects one must consider when applying for a grant or participating in an invitation to tender, it is evident that European project designers and managers need to possess a range of critical skills to successfully perform their jobs. The table summarizes the most important ones.

Skills	Project Designers	Project Managers
Analytical skills	Comprehensive understanding of EU funds and other funding sources; Ability to comprehend and navigate diverse funds, program guidelines, objectives, thematic focuses, and eligibility requisites.	Capability to comprehend and make meaning from the project proposal; Capacity to identify and solve problems as the project progresses.
Interpersonal skills	*(focus on networking)* Expertise in building a competitive consortium by leveraging well-established informal or formal networks or by participating in matchmaking events.	*(focus on collaboration)* Ability to collaborate and work within a culturally diverse and primarily virtually-based team.
Communication skills	Fluency in English; Ability to effectively communicate ideas verbally and in writing through the presentation of compelling concept notes to potential project partners; Expertise in writing project proposals.	Fluency in English; Ability to effectively communicate within the project team; Skill in producing clear and concise reports through writing; Public speaking proficiency to engage external stakeholders relevant to the project.
Financial and technical skills	Capacity to demonstrate a sound budget and financial plan by accurately estimating the project's costs; Knowledge of or ability to find the specialized technical skills relevant to the specific project at hand.	Financial reporting know-how; Proficiency in budget management; Technical aptitude in the project's specific field.

All that being said, it may come as a surprise—or not, if you are one—that the majority of European project designers and managers are self-taught, and as mentioned earlier in the context of consortium building, the skills needed are, for the most part, acquired through practical experience and on-the-job learning or attendance to EU cluster meetings or similar events organized by other funding mechanisms.

Learning European project design and management

Given the complexity of the European projects ecosystem, it is only natural that a variety of organizations, including universities, training centers and small and medium enterprises, have recently started to recognize the need (and commercial opportunity) to offer educational programs in this field.

Participants joining such programs gain knowledge about the specific objectives and content of various funds, as well as the intricacies of related calls for project proposals. Furthermore, these programs equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of project drafting, ensuring compliance with EU regulations and effective organization, management, and implementation of projects.

An example of a program of this kind is the Master 'Expert in Project Funding and European Funds' offered by the University of Bologna in collaboration with the Alma Mater Foundation. This program aims to train professionals to actively participate in European calls for proposals. It covers all aspects of project design, management, and reporting for European financing and funds. The program provides comprehensive

> *knowledge of the main European Union funds and financing, combining theoretical lectures from the University of Bologna professors and practical seminars led by industry practitioners.*

Educational programs in European project management go beyond the realm of academia and embrace a more practical approach. Even when offered by universities—as in the case of the University of Bologna—they often involve collaboration with institutions, businesses or training centers that have expertise in EU affairs and project management. This is probably due to the self-taught nature of knowledge in the field of European project management and a general lack of literature on the topic. They may also offer networking opportunities, guest lectures from professionals in the field, and access to relevant resources and materials.

In the study we conducted involving 34 interviews with European project managers, only one reported possessing an official project management certification and it is worth noting that this certification was not specifically focused on transnational partnership projects.[9]

> *The Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification is one of the most widely recognized certifications in the field of project management. The PMP is a registered mark of the Project Management Institute, Inc. and acknowledges candidates skilled in managing projects effectively. The certification is based on an examination that tests candidates on various*

aspects of project management, including project initiation, planning, execution, monitoring, control, and closure.

Disclaimer. The absence of formal certifications does not necessarily indicate a lack of competence or expertise among European project managers. Many of these professionals have developed a wealth of practical knowledge and expertise through years of successfully designing and managing European projects. However, the increasing recognition of the importance of specialized education in European project planning suggests a growing need for structured programs and certifications that cater specifically to this unique field.

If you were not a European Projects Expert before reading this far, you should now kind of feel like one, or at least have a few ideas on how you could become one. It is almost time to talk about practices to build and sustain successful collaborations. But, before we proceed, it is important to explore the benefits and challenges associated with European projects and what we currently know about their management. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: THE ECOSYSTEM OF EUROPEAN PROJECTS

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MANAGING
THE MOTLEY CREW
AND ITS COMPLEXITIES

Reflecting on his tenure as Secretary-General, Kofi Annan recalled being accused of not reforming the UN quickly enough. During a Security Council lunch, the Russian ambassador humorously remarked that Annan had more time than God. In response, he explained that God had one big advantage: "He worked alone".[1]

EUROPEAN PROJECTS ARE COMPLEX. As such, they entail both benefits and pitfalls. Focusing solely on the first while neglecting to acknowledge their challenges creates a community of insularity, where we cheer each other on without addressing the underlying issues. It is akin to sweeping the dirt under the rug, leaving it unseen but not truly resolved.

In a recent survey[2] sent out to 90 project managers responsible for projects funded through the EEA & Norway Grants, all respondents highlighted two key advantages of transnational partnership projects. The first was the "facilitation of knowledge transfer," which enables organizational development by sharing expertise, best practices, and innovative approaches across borders. The second advantage pointed out was "networking," which plays a vital role in creating new opportunities for funding.

When it comes to challenges, the landscape is more diverse. Of the respondents surveyed, 42% referred to the "high complexity" of European projects as a disadvantage. Thirty percent mentioned "communication challenges" including people's English proficiency levels (I am trying to say "There are people who do not speak English" in a nice way). "Physical distance" was brought up by 10% of respondents; 7% noted that European projects are 'time-consuming' (I am guessing Kofi Annan would agree), while another 7% expressed that they have "uncertain effects." Finally, 6% regarded European projects as devoid of significant disadvantages.

I believe few projects encounter all of these challenges, but all experience some. So, let us talk about both the positive aspects

of transnational partnership projects and the aspects that may be overlooked or hidden under the rug.

Benefits and pitfalls of European projects

The Renegade Challenge

In September 2019, Jalaiah Harmon, a 14-year-old dancer from Atlanta, uploaded a video on her Instagram account showcasing an intricate dance routine. This video became the origin of a viral TikTok challenge, widely known as the "Renegade Challenge" which rapidly gained temporary popularity.

Yet, despite its lasting impact on the TikTok community, the effects of the Renegade Challenge remain unclear. (If you do not know what the Renegade Challenge is, think of the Harlem Shake instead as an example. If you do not know what the Harlem Shake is, then I am afraid you are too old and I am not sure how to help!)

What I am trying to say is that European projects are very much like the Renegade Challenge:

- They gain temporary popularity, capturing attention and generating enthusiasm for a period of time.
- In spite of their impact, their effects appear uncertain and difficult to measure.
- They are complex and challenging to design and implement.

The rise and fall of projects

European projects are temporary by definition (we would call them the Lord of the Rings saga if they were endless). They exhibit a range of durations, influenced by factors such as their scope, objectives, and funding program. On average, these projects typically span from one to three years, encompassing a substantial timeframe for implementation.

There are also European projects of shorter duration, lasting a few months, as well as more extensive endeavors that extend beyond five years. The specific length of a project is determined by taking into account various considerations such as the project's complexity, the specific requirements set by the funding program, and the nature of the activities to be undertaken.

One significant advantage of having a predefined duration is the presence of clearly defined objectives within a rather strict timeline. The objectives are typically outlined in the project proposal, with all project partners agreeing upon them prior to the project's initiation, ideally.

However, the temporality of European projects also poses certain challenges:

Quality compromises. Time constraints can sometimes impact the quality of results and deliverables. Under such circumstances, practitioners may be compelled to focus on beneficiaries who are easier to reach, potentially overlooking more vulnerable groups to achieve key performance indicators within the project's timeline.[3]

In a similar vein, organizations that are frequently engaged in European projects sometimes prioritize "economies of scale." They aim to maximize the production of project results by implementing standardized approaches and leveraging resources at a larger scale. This can involve streamlining processes, utilizing common methodologies, and replicating successful practices across multiple projects or beneficiaries, which can lead to overlooking the diverse needs and nuances of their target groups in their efforts to achieve the project's key performance indicators.

Furthermore, from an academic perspective, researchers may be hesitant to engage in shorter projects due to the time constraints they pose to the research process. These projects may not offer sufficient intellectual challenges or opportunities for significant research contributions, causing talented researchers to prioritize other endeavors that align more closely with their scholarly pursuits.

Novelty bias. European projects are not immune to the effects of "novelty bias." This bias can manifest in various ways throughout the project lifecycle. Initially, during the project's inception and early stages, there is often high enthusiasm and engagement from project partners and stakeholders. However, as time progresses, the novelty wears off, and there is a risk of waning interest and diminished commitment. I have often heard the saying that the most exciting day of a project is when the partners learn that it has secured funding and what follows usually does not sustain the same level of enthusiasm.

One observable effect of novelty bias is a decline in communication and engagement. The once-active communication channels and social media platforms that were buzzing with

project updates and discussions can become neglected and inactive. Websites may go without updates, and the flow of information may dwindle.

Additionally, organizational resources may gradually shift towards newer activities and initiatives, leaving the ongoing European project with less attention and support. This is especially true for organizations that heavily rely on public funding, as they tend to favor the allocation of human capital resources to the submission of new project proposals to secure further funding.

This tendency can lead to a cycle where organizations that I call "project hunters," continuously pursue new funding opportunities, often at the expense of fully realizing the potential impact and success of ongoing projects. It creates a dynamic where projects may not receive the sustained attention, resources, and dedication they require for optimal outcomes throughout the project duration.

What are the effects?

The encouraging news is that in today's landscape, evaluating various public policies, activities, and programs has become a widespread practice driven by the aim of serving taxpayers' interests. Also, there are a number of platforms available that showcase the results of various European projects to increase transparency about their effects.

For instance, the Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS) stands as the European Commission's main platform for sharing results from projects funded by the

EU's framework programs for research and innovation, ranging from the First Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP1) to Horizon Europe. Additionally, platforms like the Erasmus Plus project platform* offer a space for project dissemination. Furthermore, project websites often feature dedicated sections that highlight deliverables or present project results.

However, despite these positive trends, 7% of project managers in the survey mentioned earlier state that European projects have uncertain effects. Similarly, in a focus group[4] comprising six project managers with an average of four years of experience in managing European projects and a collective ongoing involvement in 27 projects, when inquired about the impact of European projects, one of the participants responded with a thought-provoking remark, stating that it was indeed "a really good question." The others nodded but also mentioned that most projects do have positive effects.

This implies that there was a consensus regarding the positive impacts of European projects on both the project's beneficiaries and the participating organizations. However, there remained an element of uncertainty surrounding the extent of these effects.

The themes emerging from the focus group shed light on the multifaceted nature of this issue:

Focus on outputs.

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* https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/

Outputs are the tangible and immediate results that directly arise from project activities, such as the number of coaching hours delivered or the completion of specific tasks. On the other hand, outcomes reflect the changes observed within the target group, such as an increase in self-esteem or the acquisition of new skills. Finally, impact encompasses the broader and enduring effects that extend beyond the direct beneficiaries and encompass the environment, family and friends, and society as a whole. Impact includes the long-term implications of the project, including their influence on social dynamics, environmental sustainability, and the overall well-being of the community.

A significant proportion of project websites and reports tend to emphasize outputs paying relatively little attention to measuring outcomes or—even more rarely—impact. As a result, the effects of projects on participants or society at large are frequently left unexplored. Unfortunately, this occurs because project designing through the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) first and the Theory of Change (ToC) methodology later on, are not widely shared or well-known techniques for many.

Typically, the ToC forms the foundation for the project impact management framework. During the design process, project partners should view the ToC as a collaborative undertaking, commencing with a consensus on the primary problem to address and the overarching long-term goals to achieve. Moreover, a comprehensive ToC includes a detailed breakdown of all the intermediate steps necessary to accomplish the previously established long-term objectives.

Furthermore, the concept of additionality is often discussed in the context of Carbon Offsetting and impact finance, where it addresses the question of whether the effects achieved through funding are additional to what would have happened anyways. However, when it comes to European projects, additionality is not as widely emphasized.

One reason for this is the difficulty in providing empirical evidence to support it. Also, there is a debate regarding its applicability, as some would argue that European funding should support what has already been decided and planned, suggesting that the concept may not necessarily apply in this context.

In my opinion, if we aim to support the implementation of the additionality concept in European projects, we should adopt a more comprehensive view of it. For instance, instead of concentrating solely on input and output additionality—which are usually the focus of policy evaluation—it is vital to acknowledge the importance of additionality in terms of collaborative advantage. The realization of the latter depends on the ability of European project designers and managers to build and cultivate successful collaborations, which forms the central focus of the second part of this book.

One of the few pieces of research proving additionality in a collaborative setting is a study about research and development (R&D) programs in Finland. The authors looked at two types of additionality: "first-order" and "second-order." First-order additionality refers to direct funding given to firms for R&D.

> *Second-order additionality comes from knowledge sharing between firms and other positive effects within a community or group. The study found that when firms strongly identified with a particular community of practice, they were more likely to benefit from knowledge sharing and access shared resources. This led to better learning outcomes for the firms, beyond the benefits of direct funding.*[5]

Lasting effects? Many funding initiatives fail to establish robust processes for assessing and monitoring the outcomes and benefits of projects beyond their duration. Consequently, the fate of the populations affected by these projects remains largely uncharted once the project comes to an end. Without proper evaluation and follow-up measures, the full potential and lasting impact of European projects may be compromised.

Program-level evaluations. One additional challenge stems from the practice of conducting evaluations, including external impact assessments and monitoring, primarily at the program level. While these evaluations provide valuable insights, they often result in lengthy and complex reports that project managers find difficult to effectively utilize. Interestingly, within the focus group, despite the active involvement of all project managers in projects financed by the EEA & Norway Grants, none of them were aware of the fund's program-level evaluation activities. Given this context, I believe it is crucial for every project to appoint an impact manager—we briefly introduced this role in the previous chapter.

Due to limited attention to outcomes and additionality, inadequate considerations of sustainability and the tendency to conduct program-level evaluations, it is not completely surprising that the true effects of these projects may remain uncertain for some project managers.

Fear-of-foot-shooting. Back in 2019, during the EEA & Norway Grants Fund for Employment Annual Seminar in Brussels, I heard an adjunct professor of Pompeu Fabra University state that he had still not found a publisher interested in a book on "worst practices," despite the significant learning opportunities they offer.

This is one last issue that I—personally—believe contributes to the uncertainty surrounding the effects of European projects. Yet, it has not been mentioned in the focus group. It could be because many project managers are hesitant to acknowledge failure due to concerns about funding and self-preservation which I believe is a systemic problem deeply ingrained within the ecosystem of European projects.

This situation frequently arises because many project managers understandably feel that acknowledging failure automatically implies they were undeserving of funding. Consequently, they see full transparency as an action that might result in shooting themselves in the foot. After all, who wants that outcome?

Professor Amy C. Edmondson's (Harvard Business School) research[6] indicates that learning from failure involves three key activities. Firstly, it is important to detect failures and

differentiate across different types by reducing the stigma associated with them. Secondly, once a failure is identified, it is crucial to dig deeper and understand the underlying causes. Superficial explanations may not provide the necessary insights for meaningful learning and corrective action. Sophisticated analysis is needed to ensure that the right lessons are learned and appropriate remedies are implemented. Lastly, strategic failures designed to promote experimentation can be valuable in generating insights and driving innovation.

The emphasis on demonstrating value for money in public expenditure, while essential for accountability, can unintentionally create incentives for project managers to conceal shortcomings and solely highlight successes—at least to external stakeholders. Hence, many failures go undetected, are under-analyzed, and their lessons are lost.

To promote strategies for learning from failure, fund mechanisms have significant potential for improvement starting from the project proposal writing phase. This would later entail the consistent detection and in-depth analysis of failures, as well as the proactive pursuit of opportunities for experimentation. For example, funds could begin by encouraging the reporting of failures in pilots, which project managers frequently portray as trouble-free, despite their primary purpose being testing and learning from potential setbacks.

The motley crew*

When discussing the Horizon 2020 program and its cross-border collaboration, Nobel Prize winner Paul Nurse highlighted the absence of any equivalent and the challenges that individual countries would face in replicating its success.[7] He is right. European projects are unique in that they bring together a diverse mix of individuals, organizations, and nations at various levels.

At the individual level, European projects foster collaboration among people from different professions, including practitioners, researchers, trainers, and administrative staff. At the organizational level, these projects also facilitate the mixing of different types of organizations, such as NGOs, for-profit businesses, and public administrations, each with its own distinct missions and goals.

Furthermore, at a transnational level, intercultural dynamics come into play, as participants in European projects come from different countries with diverse linguistic backgrounds, possess varying religious and cultural beliefs, and exhibit diverse work styles. Similarly, organizations involved in these projects bring their own specific organizational practices, which are often rooted in their respective country-specific contexts.

If you are thinking all this sounds great in theory but also difficult to manage in practice, you are right. Let us delve into

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* A motley crew refers to a disparate collection of individuals who may not initially appear compatible but somehow manage to function effectively as a unit. The term emerged in the 18th century, originally describing the diverse and unconventional crew members aboard a ship.

project contracts, embedded practices and research findings to explore what insights these tools offer regarding the management of European projects.

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Understanding the management of European projects

A few things you should know first (again)

If you thought I was done with the fun things in the previous chapter, you are wrong. At a legal level, the relationships and governance of a transnational partnership project are regulated by a set of binding legal contracts:

- A "Consortium Agreement"—sometimes also known as a Partnership Agreement—is a legally binding document that outlines the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the consortium members involved in a collaborative project. It typically specifies the governance structure, decision-making processes, intellectual property rights, resource allocation, and dispute-resolution mechanisms among the participating organizations. It usually serves as the primary contract, but depending on the funding source, there may be additional agreements stipulated between the consortium partners, funding mechanisms, and external stakeholders.

- A "Grant Agreement" is a legal contract between a funding mechanism and a grant recipient. It sets out the terms and conditions under which the grant is awarded and specifies the rights, obligations, and reporting requirements of both

parties. The Grant Agreement typically outlines the project objectives, budgetary considerations, performance indicators, reporting schedules, and any specific terms or conditions associated with the grant funding.

- A "Subcontracting Agreement" is a contract between a project partner—the primary contractor—and a subcontractor, who is hired to perform specific tasks or provide specialized services as part of a larger project. The Subcontracting Agreement outlines the scope of work, deliverables, timelines, payment terms, and other relevant terms and conditions between the two parties. It is used to ensure clarity and accountability in the relationship between the primary contractor and subcontractor.

These and, sometimes, other contracts play a crucial role in the project management by defining the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the parties involved in the project, ensuring clarity and accountability throughout the project implementation.

In addition to formalizing clear agreements, the process of drafting these contracts should also be viewed as an opportunity to foster and strengthen collaboration among project partners. The contract drafting phase could serve as a platform for open communication, negotiation, and alignment of goals and expectations.

From practice to field

In the survey[2] I spoke of earlier in this chapter, participants were asked to share three words that they believed encapsulate the nature of relationships within their transnational partnership

projects. The purpose was to gain insights into the underlying management practices at play.

Among the responses, 18% of project managers mentioned the word 'trust' as a defining characteristic of their consortia. Additionally, 13% of respondents highlighted "collaboration" as a key element, emphasizing the significance of working together. Another notable word used by 7% of project managers was (good) "communication." Other words that were mentioned, albeit by a smaller percentage of respondents (4%), included "commitment," "friendly," "professional," and "work."

So, it seems that all European project managers have to do is establish trust and foster communication to enhance collaboration (duh).

However, the specifics of how to achieve this remain a bit of a mystery. Perhaps, they should just leave other activities such as comprehending the project's vision, coordinating workshops, and conferences, synchronizing meetings and timelines (often across various time zones), ensuring timely email responses, arranging public events, engaging with their direct target audiences, involving stakeholders, measuring and assessing impact, reporting to the funding mechanism, and staying within budget for the weekend.

The question "How do we manage this mess!?" has plagued every European project manager since the invention of transnational partnership projects. Because most European project managers are self-taught, they master the art of taking the reins through years of hands-on experience. Occasionally, they come

together to exchange information, share their expertise, and establish best practices.

> *One recent example of this type of initiative is the LinkedIn group called the "Project Managers Community of Practice T-hub." This virtual community serves as a platform for European project managers to support one another, address inquiries, shape a unified perspective on the profession, and work together for advocacy.*

On occasion, and far less frequently, European project managers opt to record their knowledge and experiences in writing, with the intention of sharing their insights for the benefit of others. As a result, a significant portion of the little available literature consists of practitioner-oriented publications like handbooks authored by project managers for project managers.

> *An example of a recent practitioner-oriented publication in the field is the handbook titled "Mythbusting: European project management in transnational partnership projects" by Léargas, an Irish nonprofit managing national and international programs in youth work, education, and training. While the title may suggest a focus on debunking popular myths, the content of the book actually aims to provide valuable insights and practical guidance. The handbook draws from the discussions and inputs of experienced project managers who have successfully managed European projects and covers four key topics that are crucial for effective project management in a transnational*

> *context: building a transnational team, managing a transnational team, embedding quality management in transnational projects, and developing transnational project outcomes.*

Scientific research on European projects (spoiler alert: it does not exist)

Several academic disciplines work together to provide an understanding of Europe, its institutions, policies, history, cultures, and societal dynamics. I would argue that, however, within European studies, the ones that offer the most insights at a micro-level, focusing on how individual actors interact with each other, are anthropology and sociology.

Marc Abélès, along with Irène Bellier and Maryon McDonald, were some of the first anthropologists to explore the institutions of the European Union. Despite the initial skepticism of anthropologists toward European politics, these three researchers undertook an immersive study[8] of the EU Commission and Parliament in the early 1990s. Their focus was on observing behaviors, practices, rituals, and symbols within these institutions. Their research led them to develop a nuanced understanding of culture, emphasizing the importance of compromise among diverse cultures, which gave rise to a "culture of compromise" within the EU. It refers to the tendency of Europe's practitioners to prioritize negotiation, even if it involves postponing the moment of decision and temporarily setting aside certain issues when opposing positions remain significantly distant.

While traditional anthropology focuses on the relationship of societies with their past, within the EU context, Abélès and his colleagues found that discussions and social representations mainly revolved around the uncertain future and the ongoing

process of building Europe—also known as European integration. By examining the dynamic interactions and complexities within the EU, these anthropologists shed light on the ever-evolving nature of culture and the significance of navigating a shared future. Unsurprisingly, subsequent studies (e.g., by George Ross) also directed their attention towards the actors operating within these supranational institutions.

When it comes to sociology, after World War II, sociologists got all excited about European integration, which involved the establishment of supranational political institutions to foster cross-border economic cooperation. But then, they kind of disappeared from the scene until the 1990s. When sociologists finally made a comeback, they extensively broadened the scope of EU studies, going beyond just looking at laws and institutions. They brought in different theories and tools to analyze things from a fresh perspective.[9]

However, while both disciplines have provided valuable insights into the dynamics of socialization, identity construction, power relations, and interactions within the European integration context, there is a vast missed agenda here. Neither anthropology nor sociology have zoomed in to uncover European projects and the actions of European project managers, stepping away from the larger political institutions we are already familiar with.*

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* A notable exception in this regard is the doctoral dissertation authored by Gregor Cerinšek, Head of the Department for Applied Social Science Research at the Institute for Innovation and Development of the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, and an experienced European project manager. The author delves into an examination of the diverse facets of capital available within the project field, exploring how these resources are extended to project partners. Furthermore, he scrutinizes the distinct approaches employed by individuals and organizations to acquire, establish, validate, uphold, or alter the distribution of power and the means to access these valuable capitals.

Management: Le grand absent?

Where shall our discerning gaze fall then? Let us turn our attention to management literature. As I said in the first chapter, this book holds value for project managers involved in European projects, after all.

Surprisingly and much to my disappointment, I was unable to locate any studies specifically addressing the management of transnational partnership projects, especially in prominent management publications. However, what I did come across—it did take me a few years though—was a scattered body of international literature that explores the management of cross-professional collaborations and the relationships between academics and practitioners, more specifically.

Previous research does offer some practical advice for these types of collaborations. Scholars suggest selecting individuals who are willing to work together, clearly defining their roles, commitments, and expectations, and regularly updating them as the project progresses.[10]

It is also important to ensure a good match between the participants' identities and the initiative's objectives, to form personal connections, such as through long-term face-to-face interactions[11] and, to acknowledge the difficulties of working with incomplete information.[12] Other recommendations include allocating time for the team to reflect on their progress, involving facilitators who understand the interests of all parties involved.[13]

Alright, all this seems sensible. Yet, there is still not a well-organized comprehensive overview of these useful suggestions and it remains unclear how they can actually be used in everyday work situations within European projects.

Curious about making your life as a European project manager easier in spite of the absence of these crucial aspects? You are in luck! The following chapter presents a structured approach with viable practices and tools to help you achieve just that.

Chapter 3: MANAGING THE MOTLEY CREW AND ITS COMPLEXITIES

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ON NUDGES, PUSHES,
AND SHOVES

Brennan: "Listen, I know we started out as foes. But after that courageous act that you showed me, against the one they call Derek, maybe someday we could become friends. Friends who ride majestic, translucent steeds, shooting flaming arrows across the bridge of Hemdale."

Dale: "I would follow you into the mists of Avalon if that's what you mean."[1]

IT IS INSPIRING TO WITNESS FRIENDSHIPS form out of unexpected people and places. And it is interesting to observe how often the little things bring fundamental change in the relationships among people who do not see eye to eye.

This is true even within a consortium of organizations that involves professionals from different countries, backgrounds, and values, all expected to play diverse roles in a project—a motley crew if you wish. Without going as far as friendship, what I mean to convey is that European project designers and managers can establish and sustain successful collaborations in European projects.

Let us start with the assumption we discussed earlier: while project managers agree on the importance of collaboration, there remains a certain air of mystery surrounding the "how." With this in mind, this chapter:

- defines what successful collaborations are
- shows the "nudges" needed to move away from worst practices embedded in the stale, corrosive presumption of "this is just another project"
- explains how to best deal with "pushes" or overt cases of tension, which often represent action opportunities to turn things around
- illustrates how "shoves" or moments of forced renegotiation might still be the chance to get a project on the right track.

To ensure clarity, I will refer to nudges, pushes, and shoves collectively as "turning points." Because this is how project

managers described them: notable and impactful events that significantly influenced the relationships within a consortium.

These moments of transformation happen when expectations are surprisingly met or even exceeded in the case of nudges. But with pushes, unfulfilled expectations cause tensions within the project team. Finally, shoves occur when significant expectations go unmet, they cannot be reversed and their consequences are felt by all project partners.

If these concepts seem too abstract, fear not. I will also discuss both "best" and "worst" (omg!) management practices that accompany these turning points. Plus, in this chapter's text-boxes, I will suggest concrete tools for their implementation. This way, you will clearly understand what actions to take and what to avoid when managing your current and future transnational partnership projects.

What are successful collaborations?

Before we roll up our sleeves, let us explain what successful collaborations are. After all, I have stated that this is the very essence of this book.

In **successful collaborations**, project managers view the transnational partnership project as an opportunity for collaborative advantage. Namely, they see the project in terms of achieving something that could have not been accomplished by any single organization acting alone, thereby gaining a competitive advantage through various means, including resource pooling, the sharing of knowledge and expertise, risk mitigation, and the enhancement of their reputation, among others.

My research and experience have demonstrated that the concept of successful collaborations is cross-cutting and applicable irrespective of the project's focus, size, or geographical scope. In essence, I firmly believe that in any transnational partnership project, striving for collaborative advantage is imperative.

Of course, most transnational partnership projects are complex enough to involve individuals with a mix of orientations toward collaboration. Nevertheless, when a significant portion of team members actively strive for collaborative advantage, the project will naturally develop and sustain a successful collaboration. The remainder of this chapter will demonstrate precisely how to achieve this.

Nudges: Managing proactively

Socializing practices

During the project's kick-off meeting, Philip, who organized the event, made sure to prioritize socializing among the partners. The meeting took place in Scotland (UK) at Philip's nonprofit, where there were plenty of leftovers. Instead of wasting the food, following Philip's suggestion, the project partners created and shared what he called a makeshift meal, fostering a sense of connection and allowing for meaningful conversations. This experience helped the partners to know each other on a personal level, making it easier to understand their preferences and perspectives. Even in situations where communication did not meet expectations later on in the project, there was greater understanding and flexibility due to the established personal connections. *(Philip, project manager in a British nature-based NGO)*

In this turning point, Philip managed proactively through "socializing practices," aiming to create a safe space for open dialogue characterized by psychological safety[2], in view of any potential—yet sometimes inevitable—tensions that might occur later on in the project. He saw social interactions as important elements of his overall strategy to maintain a harmonious project environment.

What can you achieve through socializing practices?

By incorporating socializing practices into a project, you can unlock the potential for "connection," a key ingredient of successful transnational partnerships.

Connection acknowledges and respects the differences among project partners by nurturing mutual respect, empathy, and curiosity. By valuing personalized interactions, this approach recognizes the importance of diverse perspectives and encourages meaningful connections among project members.

How can you embed socializing practices in your project?

Humans are inherently social. Therefore, socializing practices are present, to some extent, in all European projects—even in the least successful ones. Every consortium is a social setting per se and allows for some level of personal interaction among the project partners in different social contexts including face-to-face or online meetings during internal workshops or virtual calls. Yet, our analysis shows that not all meetings were created equal.

Not surprisingly, the project managers interviewed overwhelmingly identified nudge turning points to occur more frequently in face-to-face meetings rather than virtual ones. However,

simply organizing in-person workshops is not sufficient. To fully capitalize on face-to-face interactions, these workshops should incorporate activities specifically designed to foster personal conversations and allow participants to get to know each other beyond their roles as project managers.

In other words, "all work and no fun make Jack a dull boy" is the motto here. Therefore, these in-person meetings should allocate time for non-work-related activities. Yes, I am referring partly to the famous transnational dinners[3]—but it does not have to stop at small talk. While booking a restaurant and letting the magic happen is a start, it may not fully harness the potential of having the entire transnational consortium gathered in one place at the same time.

Depending on the consortium's size and budget, it would be beneficial to explore a range of social activities and consider new possibilities. For example, you could plan an add-on to the dinner you are organizing such as a "Secret Santa" present exchange. Apart from dinners, we have heard of city tours, wine tasting, hiking and camping, forced kitchen work (remember Philip?), attending concerts, postcard and book exchanges, and more.

The "Secret Santa" present exchange can be a valuable addition to a transnational partnership dinner. This activity involves members of the consortium randomly drawing names to become someone's Secret Santa prior to the in-person meeting and dinner. The Secret Santa then purchases or creates a present for their assigned giftee. The better you know the

> *person, the more thoughtful the gift can be, which encourages deeper connections and understanding among project colleagues on a personal level.*

I know what you are thinking: For three consecutive years in my office, my Secret Santa was "ill" on present-exchange day. To be honest, I am not sure what to say. I am really sorry.

Aside from rekindling your Secret Santa trauma, another drawback of face-to-face meetings is their potential for high costs. They often involve flying, making them also not very environmentally sustainable. Do not worry, there is at least one valid virtual alternative: the "buddy system."

> *In the traditional buddy system, every participant is assigned a "buddy" who serves as a mentor, guide, and contact person, offering support, advice, and collaboration. The buddy system in European projects follows a similar approach, where individuals in a transnational partnership project are paired up to provide mutual assistance and support throughout the project. This system includes regular bilateral meetings and occasional buddy challenges that aim to enhance bilateral communication and foster personal connections, promoting a sense of camaraderie and support between the paired buddies who learn to care for each other.*

Caveats

When incorporating socializing practices into a project, it is important to strike a balance and avoid overwhelming participants with excessive or forced activities or pressuring them into sharing personal information they may find uncomfortable. Moreover, these practices should be inclusive, taking into account the potential mental, physical, and cultural constraints or preferences of the project partners.

Reflective practices

Jan attended the project partners' first community meeting in Cantabria (Spain). This gathering was significant because it marked their first public appearance since they started working together. Prior to that, their interactions were limited to office environments, internal workshops, and closed meetings. They had invited two ministries and three ambassadors, and despite expecting around 68 attendees, they were surprised to see a turnout of 120 people. Under Jan's lead, reflecting on the event's magnitude a bit later on, the project partners realized that they were on the right track and that they should continue collaborating due to the tremendous potential it held. For all, it became more than just a project; it presented an opportunity to bring about meaningful change. *(Jan, project manager in an educational Polish NGO)*

In Jan's turning point, "reflective practices" involve the individual—and later on collective—process of looking back on past experiences, reflecting on what was learned from them, and using that knowledge to gain new insights. Essentially, it is a form of informal learning that occurs as part of one's experiences.

What can you achieve through reflective strategies?

Integrating reflective practices into a project can unleash the power of "transcendence," a vital element for the success of transnational partnerships.

Transcendence makes the importance of each project partner alone become less significant as their differences are overcome and transformed into a united whole. This allows for a broader perspective and a cohesive understanding that goes beyond individual differences.

How can you embed reflective practices in your project?

I understand you are reminiscing about the numerous inspiring speeches we have witnessed in sports movies. While "Ducks Fly Together" may have been effective for the District 5 peewee hockey team, our research suggests that you do not have to be a coach seeking redemption to inspire others. Reflecting practices centered around personal learning and realization can be equally powerful in achieving transcendence.

Based on the data we have gathered, it is often necessary to proactively prompt both individual and collective reflection. How can "Aha" moments be achieved, you ask? Well, evidence from Jan's and others' accounts suggests that exposing project partners and presenting their success as a team to an external audience, such as through events like conferences and community meetings, can be effective.

These events provide a platform to showcase the project's achievements, demonstrating to project partners that their success is valued by others and helping to strengthen their

relationships. Including testimonials in this type of event seems to be advantageous.

> *Testimonials are statements or speeches given by individuals who have personally benefitted from the project. These testimonials are shared with the audience to provide firsthand accounts and can be used to inspire and make the effects of the project more tangible.*

Additionally, consortia attempting to achieve transcendence can benefit from a clearly defined impact management framework. The latter not only serves as a valuable tool for measuring the change resulting from implemented interventions but might also be an effective prompt to provide project partners with solid evidence of their activities' effects. Sharing credit and celebrating success often become an integral part of the reflective practice.

In many cases, project partners are geographically dispersed or lack the resources to regularly come together for reflection. Therefore, in addition to being prompt, reflection needs to be supported over time. The data we have collected longitudinally shows that dedicating time to prepare for an event together leads to reflecting on important questions and is a worthwhile approach.

Maja, a project manager in a Slovenian private consultancy, highlighted that a project's conference preparation alone resulted in a focused and refined common vision, as well as a deeper understanding of the project's overall value. Francisca, project manager in a Portuguese cooperative, also mentioned that the

consortium was standing as a unit, rather than as individual project partners, when reflecting on the same event after it had taken place.

Caveats

One important consideration for reflective practices is that the project's impact must be positive and the consortium can demonstrate it through testimonials or assessments conducted within the project's impact management framework. While the process of reflecting on failure can hold value in certain situations, as we briefly discussed earlier, it is not appropriate for the current setting. We will revisit this topic later in this chapter to further explore its suitability and implications.

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Pushes: Managing (in)actively

Speaking up practices

The partner from Norway expressed a strong interest in proposing platforms, specifically one on project management and another on e-learning. However, Rosa felt that the platforms were imposed upon them without sufficient opportunity for discussion. The disappointment stemmed from the fact that the project had a significant focus on digitalization, yet one of the platforms provided was already outdated. Despite complying with the project contract and utilizing the platform as required, Rosa talked to us about a sense of missed opportunity and underlying dissatisfaction. However, she did not raise any objections

when the decision was made. *(Rosa, project manager in an Italian applied science nonprofit)*

Astrid mentioned that her organization has a remarkable service plan for entrepreneurship, considering it one of the best in Europe. However, she faced the challenge of project partners not recognizing their specific competence. In a digital meeting, it was difficult for her to assertively communicate their expertise and capabilities, whereas it was easier when the project partners visited in person and she could showcase their work, pushing for a better utilization of their competencies. *(Astrid, project manager in a Norwegian public administration)*

I am not here to tell you that "speaking up practices" would have necessarily solved the old-platform-conundrum. But we will never know what might have happened. In a transnational partnership project, as in life, silence carries high opportunity costs.

What can you achieve through speaking up practices?

Choosing to incorporate speaking up practices paves the way for "confrontation," which is a feared yet a necessary component of any team and should certainly not be absent in transnational partnership projects.

Confrontation is the process of bringing tension to the forefront and voluntarily discussing it by renegotiating expectations, possibly leading to "realignment." If the latter goes beyond opposing viewpoints and encourages the creation of a redefined collective, it can eventually result in transcendence.

How can you embed speaking up practices in your project?

Do you remember the clairvoyant Philip? I certainly hope so. Truth be told—if you have successfully integrated socializing practices into your project by managing proactively, half of the job is already done. Project partners will be more inclined to express their thoughts if psychological safety exists within the team. However, there are other measures you can take to promote confrontation and discourage silence within your transnational partnership project.

Firstly, let us consider Astrid's turning point. Why did she do well? Research[4] conducted by Professors Benjamin Laker (Henley Business School) and Vijay Pereira (NEOMA Business School), who surveyed more than 1,000 first-time managers and their direct reports at 76 companies around the world, has demonstrated that opting for appropriate communication channels, such as delivering nuanced messages in person or through video calls, yields positive results.

Digital communication carries a significant margin of error, particularly when interactions occur in an asynchronous manner. This is due to the fact that effective communication often relies on non-verbal cues, many of which cannot be accurately conveyed through words alone. Therefore, Astrid's decision to postpone voicing her concerns until an in-person meeting—when she could actively address them—proved to be wise.

Secondly, as I have quickly pointed out in the previous section, there is a time and a place for speaking up. Based on the data we have gathered, it is evident that most disagreements were resolved when project partners dedicated a designated time for

confrontation. By bringing the issue to the forefront and actively involving all or selected project partners in this dynamic, individuals felt empowered to express their opinions, leading to active decision-making. Taking into account the size and complexity of the issue, virtual "brainstorming sessions" or "tactical groups" can get the job done.

Structured virtual meetings known as brainstorming sessions are conducted with the participation of all project partners, aiming to generate innovative ideas, solutions, or strategies for managing tensions. These sessions are specifically designed to encourage open and unrestricted discussions, allowing participants to freely express their thoughts, insights, and recommendations. Tactical groups are instead typically formed to address specific challenges within the project. These groups consist of project partners who have direct involvement in the specific issue and are fully dedicated to shaping action plans.

Although pushes often represent action opportunities, our data shows that some individuals, such as Rosa, choose to manage inactively by remaining silent instead of speaking up, adopting "resignation." This approach involves patiently accepting what they believe is inevitable and choosing to stay silent, without expressing their opinion, thus managing tensions inactively. Project partners who employ this strategy ultimately deal with tensions by lowering their expectations. However, as Rosa's turning point clearly demonstrates, this often leads to feelings of bitterness and resentment.

Creating a "project playbook" collaboratively in the initial months of the project is a valuable tool for establishing and adjusting the rules of collaboration among project partners.

> *The project playbook serves as a dynamic and evolving document that enables project partners to establish and adapt their rules of engagement. It encompasses various aspects of collaboration, including how the team communicates. It goes beyond merely outlining guidelines and procedures; it reflects the collective values, norms, and expectations of the project partners.*

Caveats

Considering the importance of confrontation, the participation of a facilitator can significantly amplify its impact. A good facilitator possesses excellent insight into social interactions, demonstrates sensitivity towards the diverse needs of the partners, exhibits proficiency in inclusive communication, and recognizes the value of promoting confrontation over silence in both planned—such as brainstorming sessions and tactical groups—and unplanned environments.

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Shoves: Managing reactively

Accommodating practices

At the behest of the fund operator, who wanted to gain insight into the unstable ongoing situation, all the project partners were given a mere two weeks to gather in Sofia, Bulgaria. Despite the

time constraints, everyone was present, much to the fund operator's satisfaction. Dario considered this event to be of great importance as it brought clarity to matters that had previously been elusive. According to him, this moment held considerable significance as it marked the re-establishment of a newly committed partnership. *(Dario, project manager in an Italian social cooperative)*

In the case of Dario's turning point, the intervention of the fund operator serves as a response to an unstable consortium that has backed itself into a corner. Unlike a *Deus Ex Machina*, which usually destroys the protagonist's impact on the world, our heroes still have an opportunity to make a difference by adopting "accommodating practices" and embracing the necessary guidance to rescue the princess, or rather, salvage the project.

What can you achieve through accommodating practices?

Accommodating practices, which involve the acceptance of guidance from external stakeholders such as fund operators or project officers*, serve as a fundamental approach to forcibly renegotiate expectations and attain "realignment."

Realignment recognizes the necessity for adaptations and readjustments in light of evolving circumstances or external pressures. When successful, this process may foster a path toward transcendence.

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* The fund operator offers assistance to the Financial Mechanism Office of the EEA and Norway Grants, assuming responsibility for the administrative and technical tasks associated with implementing the Fund. In the case of EU-funded projects, the project officer designated by the Commission assumes a critical role as the primary intermediary and controller, overseeing the project's advancement and ensuring its effective implementation.

How can you embed accommodating practices in your project?

Is Rachel Green a pushover? I am still not sure but she is definitely more likely to compromise than Monica throughout the ten seasons of *Friends*. Yet—when needed—she gives as good as she gets. Let us call "accommodating" her ability to be flexible, at least when it comes to deciding on a restaurant.

According to the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument[5], the accommodating approach is deemed suitable when a person or group finds themselves in a situation where a mistake has been made or they are facing an unchangeable problem. This approach allows us to reactively manage the situation. Embracing accommodating practices begins with acknowledging and accepting that we have encountered failure in some form.

In their research[6], Professors Marc D. Cannon (Vanderbilt University) and Amy C. Edmondson (we met her already) explain that beliefs about failure in work groups are a group-level concept and are often shared among group members.

This means that in transnational partnership projects, each consortium can develop its own strategies for learning from failure. In other words, project partners have the chance to build an environment where they withstand failure, rather than stigmatize it.

Because kicking them while they are down never helps anybody, to overcome the stigma of failure, it is important to normalize it. Openly discussing failure becomes therefore a crucial initial stage in implementing accommodating practices within a project. This involves establishing a supportive environment where

project partners can freely discuss and reflect on their failures within the specific conditions of the project. By doing so, they become accommodating to external interventions and input.

Similar to fostering speaking up practices, the integration of socializing practices in a project plays a significant role in this sense. By establishing a safe space for dialogue characterized by psychological safety from the beginning, project partners are encouraged to freely express themselves, including when it involves acknowledging their own failures. Other tools, such as an "impact board," can support project partners in reporting and sharing failure.

An impact board serves as a valuable tool for reporting the impact of projects. It promotes transparency among project partners and aids in overcoming the challenges associated with identifying and discussing failures, including the reluctance to address them. In addition to showcasing the achievements of project partners, an impact board maintains a comprehensive record of failures, offering detailed insights into the strategies and attempts made. This record proves highly beneficial, particularly when third-party engagement is involved, as it provides a documented foundation for analysis and evaluation. The impact board is founded upon a solid impact management framework and cannot exist without it, serving as a visual representation for stakeholders.

Caveats

Incorporating accommodating practices requires the willingness of project partners to openly acknowledge errors, mistakes, problems, and, more generally, failures both among themselves and in the presence of external third parties. While it may be uncomfortable, it is crucial to do so in a learning-oriented manner, keeping in mind that European projects are driven by social goals and commitment to serving communities at our best.

Bouncing back practices

The consortium had experienced the loss of one partner, only to find another, but then faced yet another loss. Naturally, this was a disappointing turn of events for Tomas. At that critical juncture, the pressing question emerged regarding the consortium's ability to persevere. The situation remained uncertain, and from Tomas' personal standpoint, he earnestly hoped that all the partners were now aligned, motivated, and trustworthy. It became increasingly apparent to him that individualistic perspectives would not pave the way for the project's survival, as evidenced by the current circumstances. It served as a poignant reminder that their strength lay in unity—a notion that, while not revolutionary, held a newfound significance for him. *(Tomas, project manager in a Lithuanian minority rights NGO)*

If worse comes to worst and one or more project partners leave the consortium, there is no use crying over spilled milk. It also does not make sense to try and fit your ex-spilled project partner back into the milk bottle. (Wait, what?) As Tomas' turning point account shows, those who are left can and should adopt "bouncing back practices" in an attempt to recover from the setback.

What can you achieve through bouncing back practices?

Bouncing back practices, such as problem-solving, implementing stricter rules, increasing supervision, and heightened personal vigilance, generally lead to a forced renegotiation of expectations that results in "realignment."

Realignment recognizes the necessity for adaptations and readjustments in light of evolving circumstances or external pressures. When successful, this process may foster a path toward transcendence.

How can you embed bouncing back practices in your project?

Every once and a while your project will appear a disastrous mess. This and other reasons may lead one, two or more project partners to call it quits by saying "I just need space!" and, of course, the other painful line typical of this type of setback, "I think we should see other people."

With bouncing back practices, we aim not just to return to the level of performance that existed before the setback, but to soar to new heights and exceed them by managing reactively. The good news is that if you have been paying attention so far, you are already equipped with all the knowledge needed to embed these practices in your project. However, the challenging part is that they demand you to bring forth all that knowledge and employ it with an extra dose of effort.

So, what type of work teams are more likely to bounce back after adversity? Resilient teams is the answer I am looking for.

Research[7] conducted by Professors Bradley L. Kirkman (North Carolina State University) and Adam C. Stoverink (University of Arkansas) reveals four resilience resources that need to be built over time and provide virtual team members with the capacity to tackle adversities coming their way.

- Potency: The collective conviction among team members that they possess the capability to successfully accomplish all of their assigned tasks.

- Model of teamwork: Team members' familiarity with their roles, duties, and patterns of interaction.

- Capacity to improvise: The ability to rapidly innovate and create something new using existing resources.

- Psychological safety: The collective belief in the team's supportive and safe environment for members to take interpersonal risks.

In the transnational partnership projects we examined, the identified bouncing back practices align with three essential activities that contribute to the development of the four resilience resources just mentioned. Following a major setback in the project, such as the withdrawal of an organization from the partnership, project partners engaged in problem-solving (ability to improvise), reviewed and adjusted partnership rules (model of teamwork), and enhanced personal commitment towards the creation of a safe space for dialogue (characterized by psychological safety).

The team's capacity to bounce back can be nurtured and strengthened throughout the project by engaging in reflective practices to build potency, establishing a familiar and evolving

model of teamwork that encourages speaking up and utilizes tools like a project playbook, fostering a capacity to improvise through brainstorming sessions and tactical groups, and cultivating psychological safety through socializing practices.

Caveats

The objective of bouncing back practices should never be to go back to the same old same old. Similar to marriage counseling, the active involvement of project partners in bouncing back indicates their genuine interest in addressing project failures in a dedicated and purposeful manner. The goal is to break free from repetitive and challenging patterns that hinder progress, allowing the project to move forward with renewed momentum.

To sum up

In this chapter, we explored three types of turning points that project managers have identified as game-changers in the relationships within their transnational consortia. Additionally, I described the practices and tools associated with each of these pivotal moments to facilitate their application.

Nudges are instances where European project managers proactively manage through socializing and reflective practices. By doing so, they effectively build and strengthen positive relationships within their teams, fostering a sense of connection and transcendence.

Moving on, we encountered pushes—clear situations of tension where project managers seize the opportunity to reassess expectations and make choices. These choices can lead to either

confrontation, often resulting in subsequent realignment, or resignation, depending on whether they actively manage the situation by speaking up or choosing to remain inactive.

Lastly, we had shoves—circumstances of forced renegotiation that carry consequences for all project members, whether directly or indirectly. These moments require reactive management through accommodating or bouncing back practices, and they can sometimes lead to realignment and transcendence.
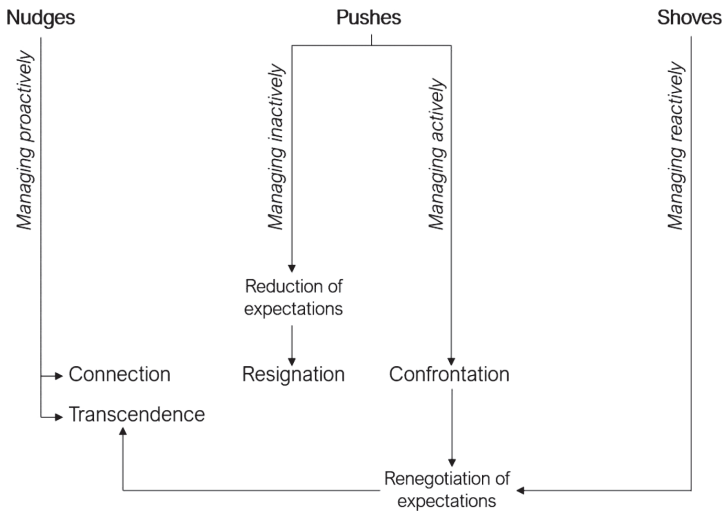
Turning points in transnational partnership projects.

In the upcoming chapter, I will delve into the collaboration life-cycle, examining the potential impact of integrating the small yet significant practices we have just explored. Additionally, I will address the crucial question of who is or should be responsible for building and sustaining successful collaborations through these practices.

Chapter 4: ON NUDGES, PUSHES, AND SHOVES

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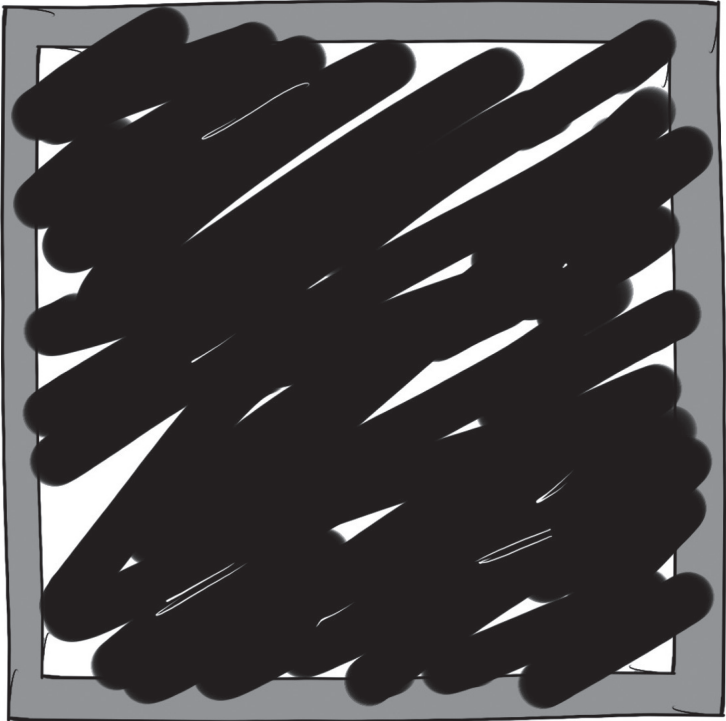
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THE WHEN AND THE WHO

This is the best idea ever

It's done and it sucks
but not as bad as I thought

(Dark night of the soul)[1]

No MATTER HOW GOOD A PROJECT MANAGER YOU ARE, at some point your project is going to lose momentum and—depending on how significant the loss is—it will feel boring, frustrating, hopeless, or worse.

I share this not to bring you down, but to acknowledge that certain challenges are just inevitable. However, instead of discussing "best" practices in a vague manner, in the previous chapter we dissected their essential elements into manageable components through the concepts of nudges, pushes, and shoves to support you in building and sustaining successful collaborations.

Now that you are aware of what is required and how to implement it, you can systematically consider embedding socializing, reflective, speaking up, accommodating, and bouncing back practices in your project to foster psychological safety and reflection, manage tensions actively and deal with setbacks.

This chapter aims instead to assist you in identifying the optimal timing and suitable people to involve in this process.

The collaboration lifecycle

The early bird gets the worm

Our research[2] has looked into how the different practices addressed in the previous chapter can impact collaboration levels. Not surprisingly, we discovered that taking a proactive and active approach to management greatly enhances collaboration within a transnational partnership, especially if applied from the very beginning.

More specifically, we observed that projects with higher levels of collaboration among the partner organizations displayed two distinctive characteristics: early engagement in proactive management and active management when confronted with tensions. Firstly, by implementing socializing practices from the beginning, project teams were able to establish strong and cohesive relationships, laying the foundation for successful collaboration throughout the project.

Therefore, these practices play a significant role in accomplishing an important outcome: group socialization. This includes gaining an understanding of one's work group, acquiring information about it, and reaching a consensus with fellow members regarding job responsibilities and priorities. Additionally, group socialization occurs when newcomers become familiar with the behaviors aligned with the group's rules, goals, and values[3], which could be encoded and accessible in the project's playbook.

Secondly, project partners' choice to actively speak up when confronted with tensions oftentimes led to a renegotiation of expectations and consequent realignment that could have not been achieved by staying silent.

Conversely, cases with lower levels of collaboration lacked the same level of early engagement in managing proactively and presented few nudges. The absence of socializing and reflective practices at the outset resulted in negative trajectories for these transnational partnerships. Additionally, when confronted with pushes, project partners in these consortia often chose to manage inactively, since they lacked a safe space for dialogue. Over time,

it became increasingly challenging for them to reverse the course and improve collaboration.

In other words, neglecting proactive management and choosing silence over speaking up go straight to our list of "worst" practices—I promised we would have one, right?—as these can harm the project partners' ability to work together effectively in the long run.

But why exactly is earlier better?

While it may initially appear as a rhetorical question, there is indeed a practical answer. A literature review[4] focusing on the obstacles and factors that aid professional socialization among undergraduate nursing students revealed that early exposure to socialization can effectively address any preconceived notions or beliefs held. This early exposure enables a seamless transition and initiation of the socialization process.

Applying the same logic to our European projects, incorporating socializing activities can assist project partners in comprehending their expected roles and responsibilities within the partnership before any wrong assumptions or beliefs are set. Such activities can help resolve any misunderstandings early on and facilitate the process of integrating into the collaborative endeavor, making it easier for partners to find their place in the project from the start.

The many dark nights of the soul

Congratulations! You have successfully embedded proactive and active practices in your project from day one. So, you are now sipping a mojito and are ready to enjoy a smooth project ride for the rest of the time being. Correct? Ya wrong.

When we looked at projects with high levels of collaboration, we were surprised to notice that they too went through multiple shoves. That is to say, even when you try to do everything right, there will be at least some dark nights of the soul for you as a project manager.

Hence, the graph featured in the epigraph of this chapter would provide a more precise representation by illustrating the collaboration lifecycle as a sequence of zigzags rather than a more straightforward inverted triangle or a linear stage-by-stage progression as depicted in earlier models of group development[5].

One reason for this is that transnational partnership projects are complex adaptive systems, involving unique combinations of partners, target groups, and environments that may not have occurred before. Also, they are subject to external shocks that might be difficult to predict. Take the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance. It posed challenges such as lockdowns and restrictions on movement and travel which many—if not all—European project managers were unfamiliar with.

Additionally, it is crucial to remember that not everybody is as cool as you are, meaning that not everybody in your project shares the same level of commitment to establishing and

sustaining successful collaborations. So, while you are updating the project playbook, meeting your buddy, and packing your Secret Santa gift for the upcoming exchange (and definitely not getting sick on that day), there might be someone like Helen from Ireland who is casually still sipping her mojito while texting on her phone and does not care as much.

However, our research findings[2] based on cross-sectional data from six projects indicate that those with a more pronounced emphasis on proactive and active management through socializing and reflective practices exhibited reduced tendencies toward inactive and reactive management. Furthermore, we observed an association between the approach to management employed (proactive, active, inactive, and reactive) and the collaboration level (CL) within the consortium. To be more precise, projects that leaned toward an inactive or reactive management approach were linked to lower levels of collaboration (scoring below 3,7 on a scale of zero to five). Conversely, projects with a more proactive or active management approach were associated with higher collaboration levels (scoring above 3,7 on the same scale).
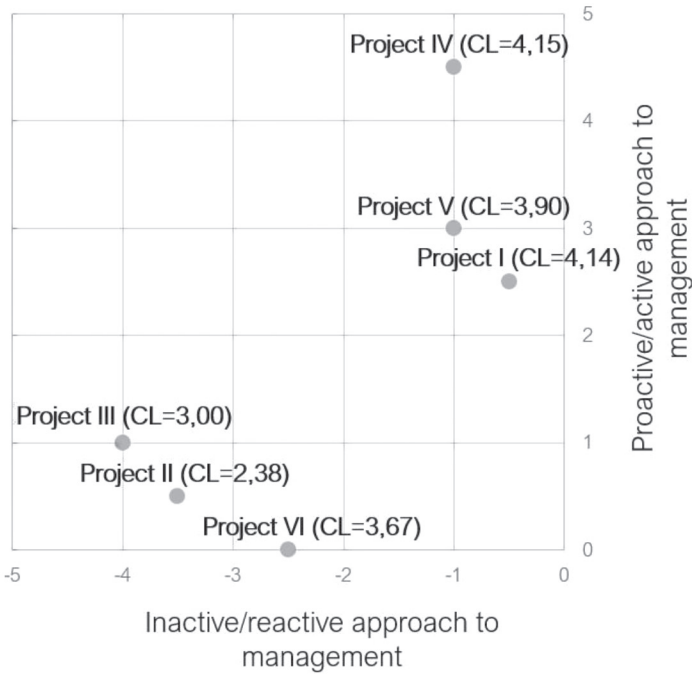
Degree of proactive/active and inactive/reactive approach to management in six transnational partnership projects.*

This is why it may be wise to centralize this process and designate a dedicated project partner for building and sustaining

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* The values on the x and y axes were determined using a symmetrical behavior scoring system. We assigned scores as follows for each project: 1.00 point for each instance of reported proactive practices, 0.50 points for active practices, -0.50 points for inactive practices, and -1.00 points for reactive practices. For example, if a project involved two instances of proactive practices (1.00 + 1.00), one instance of active practices (0.50), one instance of inactive practices (-0.50), and no instances of reactive practices, the total behavior score for the case would be 2.50 (1.00 + 1.00 + 0.50 + 0.50 - 0.50). The CL values in the plot area instead refer to the level of collaboration for each of the six transnational partnership projects under examination measured using a scale developed by researchers at the University of Kansas, see endnote n. 7 for more details.

successful collaborations within your transnational partnership project—let us call this person the "culture manager."

The decision about whom to pass the baton requires careful consideration. In the following section, we will explore three potential options and provide insight into the advantages and pitfalls each brings to the table. By examining these possibilities, you will be equipped to make an informed decision that aligns with the unique dynamics and objectives of your project.

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The trilemma

The familiar coordinator

The choice to designate the project's coordinator as the culture manager is often seen as the obvious decision. This is somewhat commonly taken for granted without much consideration. In the data we collected[2], we found that in over 80% of the cases we examined, the responsibility for establishing and sustaining a culture of collaboration within the consortium was typically attributed to the project's coordinator. However, our data revealed that not all coordinators are adequately prepared for this challenge, and funding mechanisms often fail to explicitly address this requirement.

On the positive side, the project coordinator, being a central figure in the project, possesses a level of familiarity and influence over the team members. Having a designated authority figure like the project coordinator in charge of collaboration can bring a sense of stability and order to the team dynamics. Team members

often look to the coordinator for guidance and decision-making, considering their experience and involvement in the project's execution. With their authority, the coordinator can encourage constructive dialogue, address interpersonal conflicts, and promote collaboration among team members.

But guess what? There are drawbacks to selecting the project coordinator as the culture manager. Perhaps not surprisingly, many lead partners possess project coordinators with administrative competencies rather than strong relationship-building skills. In other words, they may prefer staff members who remain steadfast in reading a 150-page implementation handbook with their morning coffee. As a result, these people may lack the necessary qualifications and experience to effectively fulfill the responsibilities of a culture manager.

Additionally, the coordinator already has numerous responsibilities, and adding this new role could become burdensome, sometimes resulting in its neglect. When coordinators are taken for granted collaboration managers, they might find themselves juggling multiple roles and end up needing a Penny—Inspector Gadget's niece—working behind the scenes to save the day.

Coordinating a project entails overseeing various aspects, such as budget management, resource allocation, timeline adherence, and communication with stakeholders. These responsibilities demand significant time and effort, leaving little room for the additional workload of culture manager role.

If the consortium agrees to assign this role to the coordinator, it is essential to make it explicitly clear and avoid relying solely on tacit assumptions. Also, it might be beneficial to allocate additional

budget for this purpose, and possibly hire additional suitable staff. The competencies required for an administrative role differ significantly from those necessary for someone responsible for building and sustaining successful collaborations.

The good Samaritan

In certain cases, there may arise a project partner who willingly steps up to the challenge and assumes the role of culture manager within the consortium. This project partner may be motivated by a genuine interest in fostering collaboration, possess a specialized background that lends itself to the task, or take on the responsibility due to an absent coordinator who is unable to effectively build or maintain successful collaborations.

The presence of this good Samaritan within the project brings proactive support to the project by introducing team-building activities and actively facilitating conflict resolution when necessary. This role becomes particularly valuable when the consortium faces significant setbacks or challenges that require strong collaboration to overcome.

Overall, from our analysis, we have seen that the only project case with the good Samaritan's involvement we identified provided better cohesion, communication, and problem-solving capabilities, allowing the project team to reach a high level of collaboration.

However, since good Samaritans do not receive any additional budget or compensation for assuming this role, they might emerge out of goodwill and dedication after the team has already encountered a deep crisis. This late intervention might limit

their ability to proactively address collaboration issues from the project's inception.

Furthermore, this approach to collaboration management is often ad hoc and improvised, lacking a systematic framework or established processes. While their enthusiasm and improvisation can yield positive outcomes, a more structured system would likely be more effective in preventing or mitigating collaboration challenges in the first place.

The designated culture manager

While there is nothing to guarantee you a perfect project, having a consortium partner as a designated culture manager will substantially increase the chances of things going well. How do I know, you ask?

Well, because "I drink, and I know things" Tyrion Lannister would say. To which I reply, "All right but you know nothing, really. I have been studying European projects for a while and I have been in a number of transnational partnerships, so I am sure my project partners and I know—and drink—more than you, Tyrion."

After investigating the practices that enhance collaborations in six transnational partnership projects funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment[2], I became interested in knowing more. Therefore, together with one of my favorite colleagues, we set our hearts on developing a project proposal where the role of culture manager was neither going to be offered to the project's coordinator nor left up for grabs. Instead, we would assign

it to a specific specialized partner with the skills and experience suitable for the role.

To avoid grappling with a severely limited budget, we also agreed that it would have to be what many would consider a "big project." Now, what exactly qualifies as big? Well, that can vary depending on who you ask (let us set aside any inappropriate jokes). As a general guideline, I have come across the notion that projects with an annual budget exceeding €500,000, spanning over two years, and involving at least four project partners can be considered sizable.

With this in mind, we established a consortium comprising eight project partners and aimed high by applying for a substantial grant of €1.3 million with a 15% co-funding rate distributed over 28 months.

Once the proposal was selected and the grant awarded*, the project StayOn, financed by the EEA & Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment, became a reality. I then had the exciting opportunity to closely monitor the development of collaboration within the partnership over a two-year period, so unlike in my previous research, I had the chance to collect and analyze data longitudinally. Here are the key findings from the data I collected and analyzed[6]:

- All the turning points and related practices I identified in the project aligned with the categories described in the previous chapter.

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* The total project budget ended up totaling €1.5 million.

- Project partners experienced various nudges and pushes, but fortunately, there were no shoves (we did have a project partner almost leaving, though!). Therefore, we did not specifically evaluate accommodating or bouncing back practices because they were simply not necessary.

- When we assessed the level of collaboration using a survey developed by a group of researchers from the University of Kansas[7] multiple times during the initiative, the consortium consistently ranked as a high-level collaboration endeavor (CL>3,7), maintaining this status throughout its duration. Actually, overall, the consortium always ranked higher than all the six partnerships we had previously examined, employing the same method for assessment.

- Nonetheless, one of the project partners consistently received low scores on the same collaboration scale throughout the project's duration when it was employed to evaluate bilateral relationships between pairs of project partners. This highlights that not all individuals necessarily align with the culture manager's efforts to establish and maintain successful collaborations.

- Remarkably, group socialization, which was also assessed several times during the project using a validated scale[8], remained consistently strong, even in the face of relatively high staff turnover. To be more specific, over 30% of the project's staff underwent changes within the initial two-year period, primarily due to a series of maternity leaves.

- If you are thinking that this seems like an excessive amount of socialization, I must reassure you that, except for one, none of the babies born during this period have both

parents within the consortium. Still, I am confident that this transnational project will go down in history as a *fertile* partnership.

Baby-making aside, how much did our high-level collaboration cost?

Asking you to do the math this late in the book would be unfair. So, let me get to the point. Although difficult to quantify exactly, our designated collaboration manager had about 20% of their budget dedicated specifically to this task, which was less than 2% of the total project budget. This 2% covered most of the tools I mentioned in Chapter 4, except travel for in-person meetings like internal workshops and conferences, and the impact board, which amounted to 4% and 0.5% of the total budget, respectively.

While one may feel tempted to see this percentage as a potential general guideline for future projects, I do believe that further extensive research is necessary before we can make such broad generalizations.

BB Consulting expert opinion: Culture to the rescue! Addressing contemporary challenges with the help of culture management

In BB Consulting, a Slovenian consultancy with a mission to recognize and develop the inner potential of companies, organizations, teams, and individuals, we use organizational culture as an entry point to almost every project. In our 20+ years of experience, we have worked with multinational

companies, small and family-owned businesses, as well as NGOs and public institutions facing growth and development challenges. We are also part of national and international projects addressing leadership, sustainable development and societal issues. Through our work, we have developed our own methodology, which focuses on creating a better flow and connectivity of three organizational elements: culture, architecture, and leadership. We do so because we recognize the motivational factors hidden in organizational culture as crucial ingredients that need to be incorporated into our development of leadership styles and organizational architecture.

Culture is what defines our motivation

Contemporary wicked* social, environmental, and economic challenges are systemic in nature and, in our opinion, require fresh approaches that go beyond the traditional institutions and rational tools of project management. As the challenges we encounter grow increasingly intricate, there arises a greater necessity for us to enhance our flexibility and recognize our interdependence in addressing them.

Some of the most important contemporary challenges we are facing today are addressed by communities that share a common purpose and rely heavily on solidarity in interpersonal relationships. Some prominent examples of communities that recently grew into famous social movements include #metoo, Youth for Climate Justice, and Black Lives Matter. What makes these

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* The term wicked problem was first popularized through the work of Horst Rittel and Melvin M. Webber in 1973 in social policy planning. Since then it is widely used to refer to complex problems with systemic nature.

communities strong is their shared purpose and reliance on the power of relationships. These shared characteristics enable them to adjust to the changing circumstances (because they are guided by a north star of shared purpose) and act as a group (because they approach issues from an understanding of interdependence, good relationships, and care for humanity). A combination of these factors is also what defines organizational cultures of purpose and care. We look at these examples as reference points for understanding the strength of "good cultures" needed to address the common wicked problems.

The wicked problem addressed by partners in the project StayOn is the high proportion of European rural youth not in employment, education, or training leading to their social exclusion. Structural obstacles like a lack of formal and informal education, and training, poor public infrastructure, and geographical dispersion, all perpetuate the issue. The social repercussions of this issue, which is prevalent in numerous rural European regions, impact the current generation and will continue to affect future generations if left unaddressed. The project partners share their awareness of this problem and in their day-to-day work address the issue. We could say that what connected them to StayOn is indeed their shared purpose: "Young people recognize, develop, and use their superpowers—activism, participation, creativity—to stay on rural communities."* It was BB Consulting's role in this

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* The proposed mission statement in the application was: Creating conditions that enable young people to "stay on" rural areas by ensuring their access to opportunities, benefits, services, and jobs. As partners, we together recreated this statement to better reflect the language and culture of the project.

project (amongst others) to strengthen their collaboration. We did so on the basis of our understanding of the elements of organizational culture.

What does a culture manager have to do with it all (and what does it take to become one)?

When working together on wicked problems (or just any old, normal problem) in transnational partnership projects, we intuitively understand which teams click and make things work no matter the obstacles—and which teams just don't. Trying to make projects work, we channel a lot of energy into the project management and the architecture of the projects, but put much less focus on the culture management and helping set up systems that support teams that click. Understanding what binds a group together and acting on it is the role of a good culture manager. While a good project manager understands the systems and processes needed to implement project activities, a good culture manager understands the dynamics of group relationships—what brings people together, why they stay together, what needs they fulfill through collaboration, and which relationships fuel their energy. These are all motivations hidden in our values, common mission, and purpose. What is most important, culture managers possess the skills to translate these motivations into architecture of shared practices—activities, systems, processes, relationships, communication, and learning—helping teams collaborate better.

Skills of a good culture manager (or a good project manager realizing the power of actively managing culture)

An effective culture manager will possess a skillset that combines three key abilities: adeptness in fostering relationships, strong leadership skills, and proficiency in project management. It is a combination of these abilities that makes a culture manager indispensable for building strong relationships and makes them relevant for the development of projects, businesses, and organizations. What sets a good culture manager apart from a leader and a project manager are the tools in relationship-building skills like self-awareness, building trust, inclusive communication, managing conflicts, awareness of others, empathy, and social skills. After all, what makes the community strong is the strength of relationships it nurtures, develops, and supports.

But how can we develop these skills? The answer is not a simple one, as the role of a culture manager is not either. As far as we know, there is not an official program specifically tailored for cultural managers at the moment. The nearest available options are typically found within courses related to People and Culture Management. Also, combining relationship building, leadership, and project management skills in one role means that a culture manager combines all the above-mentioned skills, which are usually not a main part of any curriculum, but are a side-product of education, part of someone's personality, are learned through experience and require a community-oriented value system. If you wish to try yourself out in the role of community manager, we suggest to:

- *start with raising awareness and creating the need for a culture manager in your project, organization, or team by presenting a clear case for one*

- *read our book "Community Shapers Playbook" and find any other sources on the topic you can*

- *on the basis of self-awareness and feedback from your team check how well you do on the culture manager skillset—and act accordingly*

- *find a role model of a culture manager (even if they are not officially called that) and learn as much as you can from them, what they do and how they do it (if possible, ask them to be your mentors)*

- *if you can, use a coach to help you improve the skills you need to be better at the role*

- *do not ask for permission, just do it: if you are interested in the impact of the role, try it out—in your team, community, project.*

Recommendations for project managers, designers, coordinators

Our lessons learned in the role of StayOn culture manager and also from our practice in building company cultures and community management:

PLAN

- **Identify your culture**

  When possible, invite all the relevant stakeholders in a common activity of culture identification. Identify and

define your common mission, vision, and values. Do it together and/or test your assumptions about culture regularly.

- **Codify your culture**

  In the design phase of project planning, test as many of your planned activities, processes and systems, goals and partners, as possible against your culture (i.e., vision, mission, values). Codify your culture in a Playbook by writing down a set of agreements to bring your culture to life. You want a culture of care? Integrate a section for relationship building in your budget. You want a culture of purpose? Recognize the people and activities that bring you closer to it.

IMPLEMENT

- **It is not (at all) just fun and games**

  Actively managing culture means working on it in a systemic way. As with all integral project/business operations, culture-building activities have to go through the design, implementation, follow-up, and evaluation phases.

- **Nobody will notice, but many will remember**

  Put yourself on the agenda and integrate culture-building elements in as many activities as possible. Everything from inserting a five-minute "How are you today?" check-in at the beginning of the meeting to communicating values and vision where possible.

SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS THAT LAST

- ### *When things (might) go sideways act collectively*

  The smallest issue can grow into a major crisis if not addressed promptly. Attentively listen to the needs of project partners and act on them before they escalate. A shared group response to the pain of the individual partner will create stronger bonds. Do it by recommending brainstorming sessions or tactical groups on the topic you recognize as potentially a burning issue, facilitate solution-oriented conversations and communicate from a position of shared purpose.

- ### *Put a postcard on your fridge*

  Encourage a culture of care and appreciation for each other through the design of small acts of kindness and supporting bonds across daily operations. Facilitate challenges like postcard exchange, group playlists, gifts, surprises. People, as do flowers, flourish better when tended with care.

  A single project might not solve the wicked challenges we are faced with today. But integrating a culture of purpose and care systematically into as many projects, organizations, businesses, and public policies will strengthen our resilience to them and open up new possible answers to them. Why not with a little help of a culture manager?

Finally, I am aware that having a designated culture manager with a portion of the grant and an established system for fostering and sustaining collaboration within the consortium may not be feasible all the time. I am also quite sure that it would be more practical for the project coordinator to assume additional responsibilities in some cases. What these cases are, is up for debate. Mine are speculative observations, and conducting studies to explore various options would undoubtedly be valuable.

If you liked what you read so far and you are thinking, "Alright, thanks for the nice read. Bye bye!" I appreciate your positive feedback. However, I am afraid I cannot let you go without a bit of homework. I encourage you to explore the upcoming and final chapter to discover what can be done to support the creation and sustainment of successful collaborations at the micro, group, and macro levels.

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Chapter 5: THE WHEN AND THE WHO

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6

STEP UP

No, I am not referring to the movie that one IMDb user review beautifully describes as "*Saturday Night Fever* meets *Take The Lead* meets *8 Mile* meets *You Got Served* meets *Good Will Hunting* meets *Dirty Dancing* meets *Fame*; there's more meets here than a well-laden charcuterie platter. The end result, however, is likely to leave one ravenous for something more substantial."[1]

THERE IS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE TO DO. In the ecosystem of European projects, many different stakeholders can and should step up by taking action.

In this concluding chapter, I will organize my comments into three distinct sections. Firstly, at the micro-level, I provide recommendations for individuals engaged in European projects, particularly project managers, to enhance collaboration within their transnational partnerships. Secondly, I move to the group level and offer suggestions for project designers and project coordinators. Lastly, I address macro-level stakeholders and present suggestions for institutions, funding mechanisms, fund operators, and project proposal evaluators.

Individual actions

Transnational partnerships can greatly benefit from the actions and involvement of individuals. My message to all project managers is this: building and sustaining successful collaborations is a formidable endeavor. Therefore, do not assume that it will spontaneously materialize within your transnational partnership project. You must begin to approach it systematically, and reading this book is the initial step in that direction.

In Chapter 4, we explored a range of practices that can be implemented by designers and managers in European projects. Specifically, we highlighted the importance of proactive efforts to establish psychological safety right from the outset of the initiative, employing nudges—socializing and reflective practice more specifically—as a means to build and sustain a culture of collaboration.

Furthermore, when encountering tensions, we have seen how it is often advisable for project managers to strive for a renegotiation of expectations with their project partners. Also, this book dealt with deeper crises—or shoves—and discussed what reactive practices could be beneficial in such cases.

In addition to the aforementioned suggestions, I strongly encourage everyone to embrace innovative thinking and explore new avenues for building and sustaining successful collaborations. The examples and tools linked to the practices outlined in Chapter 4 are not exhaustive, and there is ample room for developing fresh and imaginative approaches to foster improved collaboration in transnational partnership projects. By harnessing our collective ideas and efforts, we can unlock the potential for transformative collaboration experiences.

Finally, as you, the reader, engage with the insights provided in this book, I invite you to share these valuable practices with your colleagues and—if you have any—with your friends. Spreading awareness of their benefits can have a significant impact. If possible, consider passing them on through employee onboarding processes within your organization, and ensure that project handovers include an overview of these practices and tools.

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Group level recommendations

When operating at the group level within a consortium, it becomes crucial to thoroughly consider the feasibility of designating a culture manager from among the project partners. This

assessment should take into account various factors, including the nature of the project, its scale, its objectives, and its duration. Although the selection process for a culture manager may not have been extensively addressed in this book, it would be reasonable to evaluate the candidate's suitability based on their possession of the necessary skills and qualifications—which we have briefly touched upon in Chapter 5—to effectively fulfill the role.

In instances where appointing a specific culture manager is not a viable option, an alternative approach is explicitly assigning the role to the project coordinator or any project partner with an affinity for culture management. In this scenario, the coordinator or alternative project partner assumes the responsibility of developing a relatively straightforward collaboration framework by incorporating the practices and tools outlined in Chapter 4.

This arrangement should be established at the proposal writing stage, possibly linked to an additional share of the budget with the guidance of a project designer, to ensure that all parties involved have a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities right from the project's early stages.

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Remarks for macro-actors

The analysis in this book implicitly suggests the potential value of institutions such as the European Commission in adequately preparing project managers for engaging in collaborative endeavors.

To do so, institutions could leverage the insights from this book to inform the creation of manuals, guidelines, and other instructional materials. These resources can then be utilized to establish mandatory training programs, contributing to project managers' readiness to navigate and thrive in collaborative European projects.

This could also happen by implementing other various measures such as coaching sessions, mentoring initiatives, and other forms of structured and unstructured support for those interested in playing a meaningful role in the ecosystem of European projects.

There are significant implications for funding mechanisms to consider as well. Funders and their administrators often prioritize administrative tasks when managing grants. Collaborating in a transnational project, however, is by no means a trivial matter. Engaging in a transnational project requires more than mere coordination—it often demands a comprehensive approach. Consequently, it would be worthwhile to establish explicit guidelines and requirements depending on the program and allocate a fixed portion of the budget, just as is often the case with the management overhead, specifically for a designated collaboration manager, when possible.

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Last word (not the cocktail)

In the first chapter of this book, I mentioned that the programs and projects funded by different organizations in the EEA and the EU cover a broad range of areas. These initiatives include things like rural and urban development, research and innovation, humanitarian aid, employment, and social inclusion.

Most, if not all, of these projects are oriented towards social objectives and yield positive—although often uncertain—effects for both their beneficiaries and the organizations involved.

Considering that better collaboration can improve our chances of successfully reaching these social goals, what are we waiting for?

Chapter 6: STEP UP

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1 Catterall, A. J. (2009, November 12). Step Down [Review of the film Step Up, directed by Anne Fletcher]. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0462590/reviews?sort=curated&dir=desc&ratingFilter=1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To maintain the collaborative spirit that I deeply value, I feel it's only right to extend my heartfelt gratitude to those who have supported me throughout this journey. Just like in every other aspect of my life, this was not a solo adventure. Though I may have embarked alone on trips to exotic places in my early twenties, I eventually ended up befriending other kindred souls along the way.

Anyway, I really wanted to express my immense appreciation to my family, friends, and colleagues for their unwavering support and constructive criticism that has allowed this book to evolve and become what it is now.

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Also, I need to thank all my research informants for generously sharing their valuable insights during numerous interviews and surveys.

GLOSSARY

Accommodating practices: They entail the acceptance of guidance from external stakeholders like fund operators or project officers and constitute a fundamental approach to forcefully renegotiate expectations and achieve realignment. They are indicative of shoves and managing reactively.

Additionality: Addresses the question of whether the effects achieved through funding are additional to what would have happened anyway.

Big projects: European projects with an annual budget exceeding €500,000, spanning over two years, and involving at least four project partners.

Bouncing back practices: Practices of resilience, encompassing problem-solving, the implementation of stricter rules, increased supervision, and heightened personal vigilance. They can lead to a renegotiation of expectations that results in realignment. They are indicative of shoves and managing reactively.

Brainstorming sessions: Structured virtual meetings conducted with the participation of all project partners, aiming to generate innovative ideas, solutions, or strategies for managing tensions.

Buddy system: Approach in European projects, where individuals in a transnational consortium are paired up to provide mutual assistance and support throughout the project.

Collaborative advantage: Refers to the competitive edge or benefits resulting from engagement in a transnational partnership project and goes beyond what individual organizations can achieve independently.

Confrontation: Process of bringing tension to the forefront and voluntarily discussing it by renegotiating expectations.

Connection: Acknowledges and respects the difference among project partners by nurturing mutual respect, empathy, and curiosity. By valuing personalized interactions, this approach recognizes the importance of diverse perspectives and encourages meaningful connections among project members.

Connectors: They invest a great amount of their time in making introductions between organizations, know who the gatekeepers are, and can provide the right contacts when needed.

Consortium: A formal alliance of organizations or institutions that come together for a project.

Consortium Agreement (a.k.a. Partnership Agreement): A legally binding document that outlines the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the consortium members involved in a collaborative project.

Culture manager: Is dedicated to building and sustaining a successful collaboration by understanding what binds a group together and acting on it.

Culture of compromise: The tendency of Europe's practitioners to prioritize negotiation, even if it involves postponing the moment of decision and temporarily setting aside certain issues when opposing positions remain significantly distant.

Economies of scale: Maximizing the production of project results by implementing standardized approaches and leveraging resources at a larger scale. This can involve streamlining processes, utilizing common methodologies, and replicating successful practices across multiple projects or beneficiaries.

Erasmus Plus (a.k.a. Erasmus +): EU's program initiated in 2014 that combines all the current schemes for education, training, youth, and sport.

European Commission (EC): Stands as the politically independent executive branch of the EU. It bears sole responsibility for formulating proposals for new European legislation and executing the decisions made by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU.

European Economic Area (EEA): Comprises 27 Member States of the European Union plus Liechtenstein, Iceland, and Norway.

European funds: Various financial instruments and resources available at the European Union level.

European projects (a.k.a. transnational partnership projects): Collaborative initiatives that engage organizations from multiple countries or regions, both within and outside of Europe. These projects receive funding and support from the European Union or other funding sources. The main aim of these initiatives is to tackle shared challenges, foster cooperation, and accomplish specific objectives within defined timeframes.

European Union (EU): Unique political and economic union of 27 European countries with over 446 million inhabitants who speak different languages, practice different religions and have unique customs and traditions.

Fear-of-foot-shooting: Situation in which, not only is any form of project failure strongly discouraged, but unsuccessful outcomes are also not explicitly acknowledged or communicated to external stakeholders.

First Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP1): Was proposed by the European Commission and adopted in 1983. It served as a strategic tool to facilitate the adoption of research programs in a more coordinated and coherent manner within the EU.

Formal network: Group of organizations cooperating to acquire funding for European projects. A formal network can be legally formalized or not and operates under a set of protocols that establish its governance and rules.

Free-riders: Individuals or entities that benefit from the project resources without contributing their fair share.

Fund: Financial resource or a pool of money allocated for funding various initiatives, programs, or projects.

Good Samaritan: Project partner who willingly assumes the role of a collaboration manager within a consortium.

Grant: Nonprofit funding opportunity, that usually requires co-funding, awarded to individuals, single organizations, and institutions or groups thereof to carry out specific projects or activities that align with certain policy objectives or priorities.

Grant Agreement: Legal contract between a funding mechanism and a grant recipient.

Group socialization: Includes gaining an understanding of one's work group, acquiring information about it, and reaching a consensus with fellow members regarding job responsibilities and priorities. It occurs when newcomers become familiar with the behaviors aligned with the group's rules, goals, and values.

Horizon Europe: The European Union's research and innovation funding program until 2027.

Horizon 2020: The European Union's research and innovation funding program 2014-2020.

Impact: Broader and enduring effects that extend beyond the project's direct beneficiaries and encompass the environment, family and friends, and society as a whole. These include the long-term implications of the project, including their influence on social dynamics, environmental sustainability, and the overall well-being of the community.

Impact board: Tool for reporting a project impact, enhancing transparency among partners, and facilitating open discussions about failures.

Impact manager: Oversees the process of measuring and assessing the impact of the project in order to improve it and enhance the capacity of project partners to measure, evaluate, and manage the effects they have on their target groups.

Lead partner (a.k.a. Lead applicant): Project partner that assumes the responsibility of coordinating and overseeing the project activities, typically taking on managerial and administrative tasks.

Logical Framework Approach (LFA): It is a systematic and structured planning and management tool used in project design to outline project objectives, activities, indicators, and assumptions in a logical and coherent framework.

Net EU financial contribution: Amount of funding received by the project beneficiary, subtracting the EU contribution from linked third-party beneficiaries.

Newcomers: Organizations that have not previously received funding under a specific program or have not been funded by European funds in general.

Novelty bias: Tendency for project partners and stakeholders to favor new projects over ongoing ones.

Nudges: Turning points that happen when expectations are surprisingly met or even exceeded among project partners within a European project.

Outcomes: Changes observed within the project's target groups.

Outputs: Tangible and immediate results that directly arise from project activities, such as the number of coaching hours delivered or the completion of specific tasks.

Participation: N times an organization participates in N projects.

Playbook: A document for project partners to set and adjust their rules of engagement, covering aspects like team communication.

Program: Organized and structured scheme to address particular needs or solve problems in various fields, such as education, healthcare, business, technology, and social services.

Project coordinator: managerial and administrative role performed by an individual within a transnational partnership project on behalf of the lead partner.

Project deliverable: It is a tangible or intangible product, result, or outcome that is produced as a result of completing a project or a specific phase of a project.

Project designer: The individual bearing the responsibility for formulating a project concept, assembling a consortium, drafting and submitting the project proposal.

Project hunters: Organizations that continuously pursue new funding opportunities, often at the expense of fully realizing the potential impact and success of ongoing projects.

Project manager: This role becomes significant only once a successful project proposal has been approved, granting the project the chance to materialize. The project manager is tasked with overseeing the project's execution on behalf of their organization.

Project partners: Organizations that collaborate and work together on a specific European project.

Project proposal: Detailed document outlining the project idea and budget. For EU funding, specific templates provided by the funding programs are used.

Psychological safety: The collective belief in the team's supportive and safe environment for members to take interpersonal risks.

Pushes: Turning points caused by unfulfilled expectations that lead to tensions within the project team.

Realignment: Recognizes the necessity for adaptations and readjustments in light of evolving circumstances or external pressures.

Reflective practices: Individual and later collective process of looking back on past experiences, reflecting on what was learned from them, and using that knowledge to gain new insights.

Resignation: A strategy adopted by project partners that patiently accept what they believe is inevitable and choose to stay silent, without expressing their opinion, thus managing tensions inactively.

Shoves: Turning points that occur in a European project when significant expectations go unmet. They cannot be reversed and their consequences are felt by all project partners.

Socializing practices: Activities involving personalized and social interactions, aiming to create a safe space for open dialogue.

Speaking up practices: Voicing opinions, concerns, ideas, or feedback within the context of a transnational partnership project.

Subcontracting Agreement: Contract between a primary contractor, usually one of the project partners, and a subcontractor, who is hired to perform specific tasks or provide specialized services as part of a larger project.

Success rate proposals: Percentage ratio between the number of applicants in retained proposals (numerator) and number of applicants in the eligible proposals (denominator). This calculation is mostly relevant for a given country.

Tactical groups: Are created to tackle specific project challenges, comprising dedicated project partners directly involved in shaping action plans for these issues.

Tender: Formal offer or proposal submitted by an organization or an individual in response to an invitation or request for bids.

Testimonials: These are statements or speeches given by individuals who have personally benefitted from a project.

Theory of Change (ToC): This is a methodological tool that outlines the expected change process in a specific context, guiding project partners from defining problems and long-term goals to detailing intermediate steps, and often serving as the foundation for the project's impact management framework.

Transcendence: Makes the importance of each project partner alone become less significant as their differences are overcome and transformed into a united whole.

Turning points: Notable and impactful events that significantly influenced the relationships among project partners within a consortium.

European countries have a long and rich history of collaboration (and conflict, for that matter, but that would be a different book!). When it comes to participating in European projects focused on environmental and social goals, however, collaboration skills very much resemble Pai Mei's closely guarded Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique: Sought after by many, yet mastered by only a select few. This is despite their well-established impact on project performance.

Within the pages of **Collaborating in European Projects,** Giulia Parola shares her research discoveries and firsthand insights on cross-border collaborative initiatives in a straightforward and transparent manner. She rationally advocates for the essential role of a culture manager in European projects, finally unveiling the secret of how project designers and managers can build and sustain collaboration within this truly unique system worldwide.

Giulia Parola, PhD, is a project manager, researcher, and lecturer.

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