Tinkerbell and the Empire State Building: Recalling what seems to be forgotten [1]

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Introduction

"I do believe in fairies! I do! I do!!" (Peter Pan)

In the 1905 play "Peter Pan; or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up", Sir James Matthew Barrie described how Peter Pan, through his strong beliefs, brought the fairy Tinkerbell back to life. In this short essay, we aim to initiate discussions on the role of strong beliefs and the so-called "Tinkerbell effect" in upholding taken-for-granted assumptions within the construction industry.

As the basis for the discussion, the essay reports on a recently published journal article in **Business Horizons** entitled "*Revisiting the construction of the Empire State Building: Have we forgotten something?"* (Jacobsson and Wilson, 2018). Presently the article is also sold as a case study and teaching case by **Harvard Business Review**. (The case study can be accessed at https://tinyurl.com/HBRcasestudy and the teaching case at https://tinyurl.com/HBPEcase)

The Empire State Building

The Empire State Building (ESB) was built in 1930-1931, which was at the beginning of the Great Depression—the worst economic downturn in modern history. Interestingly enough, the construction was completed 40% under budget and 25% faster than anticipated. The construction period was a mere 13 months, which was about 5 months faster than initially anticipated, and the total cost came to about $24.7 million which should be compared with the $43 million initially estimated (Jacobsson and Wilson, 2018). For a project of this size to be both faster and cheaper seems almost unreal, especially when compared with more modern megaprojects such as the Sydney Opera House in Australia (built in 1959-1973), which had a 1,400 % cost overrun, or the Scottish Parliament Building in Scotland (built in 1999-2004), which ended up with a 1,600 % cost overrun (Flyvbjerg, 2014:10).

Based on the observation that the ESB was the fastest erection of a skyscraper to date, we set out to take a retrospective look at the effort that went into the construction by reviewing the existing writings on ESB. In essence, we ask "*how the afore mentioned success was possible and if there something we can learn from it*?" (Jacobsson and Wilson, 2018:48).

Through the review and analysis, we outline twelve different factors—divided into strategic, operational, and contextual—that appeared to have played a role in the success. The five strategic factors were; objective, financing, approach, leadership and organization. The five

[1] How to cite this article: Jacobsson, M. and Wilson, T. (2018). Tinkerbell and the Empire State Building: Recalling what seems to be forgotten; *PM World Journal*, Vol. VII, Issue VII - July.

operational factors were; equipment, logistics, design, repetition and motivation. And finally, the two contextual factors playing a role in the success were, economy and weather. Reflecting on the results, we highlighted how the ESB avoided some of the previously identified major sources for megaproject failure, factors such as impacts on local environment, laws and regulations related to planning, insufficient funding, late changes in the scope and design of the project, government bureaucracies, etc. (See e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2011; Lundrigan et al. 2015; Plotch, 2015). We concluded, however, that it is too simplistic to say that any single factor individually explains the success, so we argued that it was rather the "*interplay among a dozen factors that enabled the observed results*" (Jacobsson and Wilson, 2018:454). But there might be more.

A second reflection

Basically, we get down to this—construction is a service, and service theory is based on Grönroos' expectation/delivery gap, i.e., the degree to which actual service meets expected service (Grönroos, 2007; Jacobsson and Wilson, 2012). Commonly, it is the "actual" terminal of the gap that causes concern. That is, the actual service received is not as good as would be expected. For instance, you might buy a meal out and the food is cold, or the server is slow or rude, then you are not pleased. That judgment is basic, and the nature of service management today is to improve actual performance.

With regard to construction, it is the other terminal of the expectation/delivery gap that is our concern, the expected, or more relevantly, accepted terminal. In the original formulation of our paper (Jacobsson and Wilson, 2015), interest was piqued by a replacement of a two-lane bridge on a bypass. The design was common and because the bridge was a replacement, the site was at least preliminarily prepared. In the particular case, the work was started first of May and scheduled to be done the end of October a year later at a cost of $10.2 million. In the local vernacular, "*That's 18 months and a chunk of change*".

It was not so much the money because inflation takes care of some of that, but in the light that ESB was completed in 13 months. Thirteen months for an iconic structure, compared to 18 months for a replacement bridge—clearly something was at work here. Our assessment was that the construction industry had somehow not gotten less efficient, it was that expectations had changed. The taken-for-granted assumptions in state funded construction had grown from ASAP to two years. Longer times means higher costs—borne by taxpayers. We know that we can do better.

The Tinkerbell Effect

So, what about Tinkerbell? Well, building on service theory (Grönroos, 2007) and on the notion that strong beliefs uphold taken-for-granted assumptions, it might be time to question the contemporary beliefs within the construction industry. For example, what taken-for-granted assumptions about construction projects are there? Why do we accept 18 months construction time for a replacement bridge? How did we end up here? The Peter Pan story was about believing. Tinkerbell was brought back to life by the strong beliefs of Peter. Perhaps like Peter, if we start believing again in expeditious projects, they will be brought back to life.

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