



## iKNOWLEDGE

**ASK MAGAZINE:** By practitioners for practitioners.

**ASK VOLUME ONE:**

### LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**Arrogance: Number One Enemy of Learning**  
by Alex Laufer

#### Learning from Experience

I was confused and didn't know how to react when Jim Carroll, a highly regarded figure in the construction industry, proudly presented me with his "Nine Elements for Project Success," the product of two years arduous labor. These nine elements were presented as a well-accepted model, as if they were based on solid findings, and were meant to serve as guidelines for the successful management of capital projects. To my mind, however, the nine elements were based on weak hypotheses and were clearly deficient.

Jim, who is now the President of Flour Daniel/Morrison Knudsen, LLC, was at the time in February 1988 serving on the Construction Industry Institute (CII) Project Organization task force. The CII, a national research organization established in 1983, is located at the University of Texas in Austin. It brings together 90 owners and construction companies with 30 universities in an effort to improve the management of capital projects.

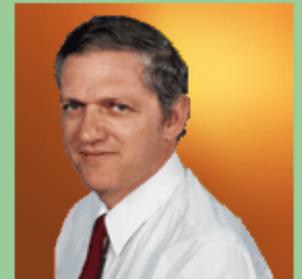
When I was first invited to join this task force, it was just after it had experienced a breakthrough. In one of its most productive meetings, the task force was able to identify the "Nine Elements for Project Success." The task force then appointed a small team of five members, headed by Jim, to produce a handbook for practitioners that would thoroughly explain each of these nine elements. I met this team at its first meeting, where Jim allowed me to peruse the nine elements in their rough form and asked me to write a chapter on project strategy. I honestly felt, however, that I could not fulfill his request.

I just could not accept the "Nine Elements for Project Success." First, they did not cover very important areas of capital projects. Second, they were stated as the "one-best-way" principles, completely ignoring the rich variety of project contexts stemming from the different environments, organizations, technologies, projects, and people.

There was another issue complicating the matter for me. I was very flattered being invited to join the CII task because I knew that at that time I was the only foreign scholar invited to work for the CII. It offered me access to some of the most progressive organizations in the world, and the ability to collect invaluable data from them. I came to the CII with the understanding that I was expected to conduct research for them. I did not feel that my accumulated theoretical research findings allowed me to prepare a chapter useful for practitioners.

I spent a full three hours talking with Jim. To be more accurate, I should say arguing and debating with him, often quite heatedly. At first he stonewalled me. I could not produce the tiniest dent in his rock-hard opinion. Jim stubbornly maintained that applying these nine elements was the way, and the only way, to achieve project success. After all, it took the task force two years to agree on these elements, and Jim was clearly in no mood to retreat and re-examine them. He wanted to make further progress and bring back to the task force tangible products, that is, finalized chapters of the handbook.

It was close to midnight when I realized that I would never be able to convince Jim of the weakness of the nine elements and was almost about to give up. As a last resort, I asked him whether he would be ready to put the nine elements to a personal test. That is, I asked him to see whether the application of the nine elements could explain the success or failure of the projects with which he was involved during his career. Jim confidently agreed to put the elements to the test.



#### THE EDITOR

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*"Breakthroughs  
come from a  
fresh question,  
not a ready  
answer."*



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