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# The Role of Project Managers as Improvement Agents in Project-Based Organizations

Project Management Journal
Vol. 50(3) 1–15

DOI: 10.1177/8756972819832784
journals.sagepub.com/home/pmx
SAGE

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**Abstract**

We propose that the project manager is implicitly expected to participate in and contribute to continuous improvement in project-based organizations (PBOs). This article explores how project management literature treats the project manager in relation to improving overall PBO performance. The results, supported by case study insights, indicate implicit expectations of the project manager to contribute to organization-level PBO improvement. We argue that if organization-level improvement should be part of project management practice in PBOs, as promoted in project management literature, the role of improvement agent needs to be formalized for the project manager.

**Keywords**

behavior, improvement, long-term, project-based organization, project manager, role

## Introduction

This article explores the role of the project manager in relation to improvement efforts in project-based organizations (PBOs). Improving (i.e., making something better) project management practice is part of the project management research tradition (Jacobsson & Söderholm, 2011) but is recognized as difficult to achieve at an organizational level (cf. Fernandes, Ward, & Araújo, 2014; Scarbrough et al., 2004). PBOs, that is, subsidiary or stand-alone organizations that produce a majority of their products or services through projects (Pemsel & Müller, 2012; Turner & Keegan, 2000), have, for example, adopted maturity models as a strategic tool for improving processes, contributing to a systematic approach to identify and coordinate improvement actions, but with limited or no knowledge regarding the effects on performance improvements (Kwak, Sadatsafavi, Walewski, & Williams, 2015). There is evidence of project management performance influencing project success (Mir & Pinnington, 2014); however, the general level of project success (i.e., deliver within time, cost, scope) is still considered to be low (Fernandes et al., 2014).

According to Hobday (2000), PBOs operate on two distinct levels: the project level and the organizational level. Previous research has shown that, for example, learning at one level may inhibit learning at another level, because high levels of learning in projects are appropriated to a limited extent on the organizational level (Scarbrough et al., 2004), consequently limiting potential organization-level improvements. Further, considering knowledge governance in PBOs, Pemsel, Müller, and Söderlund (2016) argue that achieving a long-term and successful interaction between these levels has proven to be difficult. Similarly, Müller, Glückler, and Aubry (2013) emphasize the conflict between the short-term nature of projects and the long-term perspective of organizations (e.g., for achieving organizational learning). Findings provided by Loo (2002) and Chronéer and Backlund (2015) indicate that project managers prioritize project-level activities (short-term delivery) over organization-level activities that benefit long-term organizational improvement efforts, such as learning activities (e.g., post-project reviews). Consequently, the transfer of generated knowledge and lessons learned from the project to the organizational level are identified as problematic and insufficient in project management research.

As the project management field has evolved, the expectations of the project manager have increased, for example, to include a long-term focus on value creation (Andersen, 2014; Shenhar, Dvir, Levy, & Maltz, 2001), to be involved in early project phases to ensure strategic alignment of the project (Pinto & Winch, 2016), and to learn in projects to benefit the PBO (e.g., Scarbrough et al., 2004). Consequently, the project manager is expected to focus on both the project and

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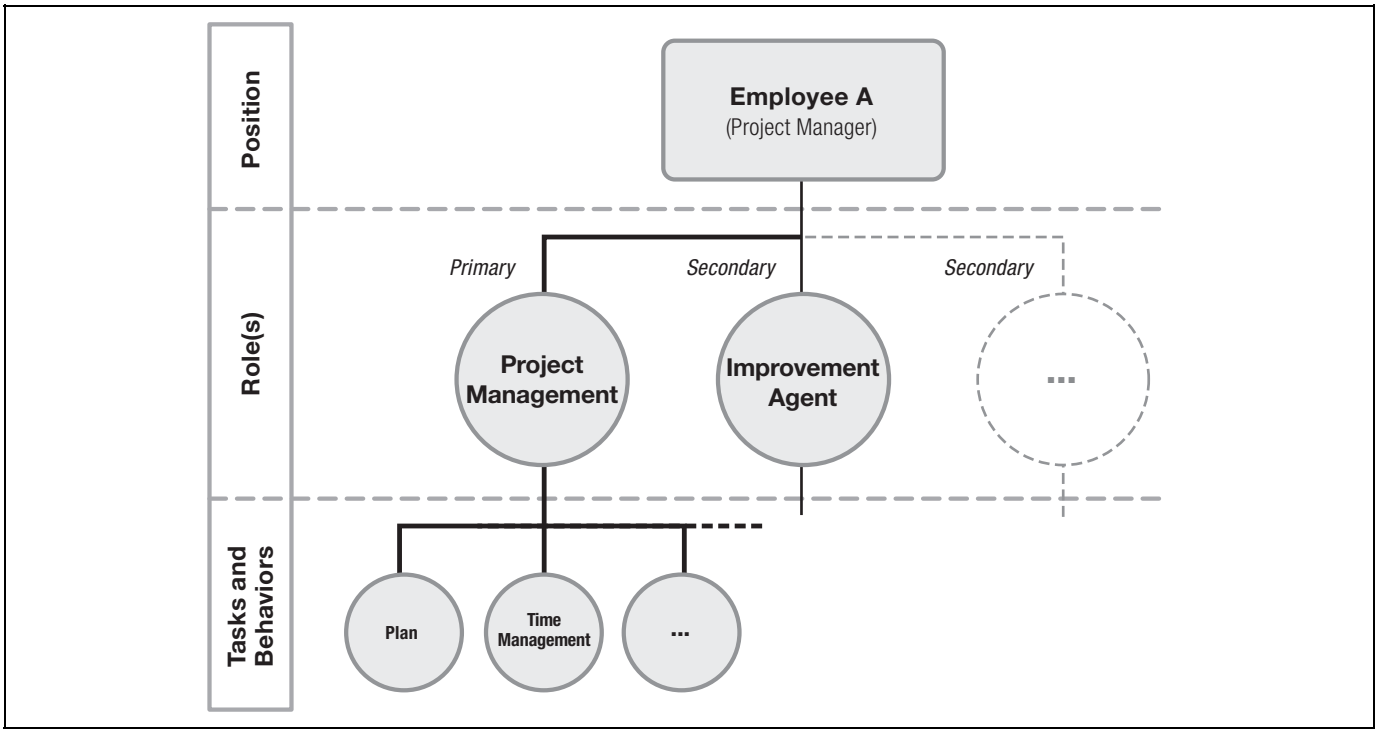


**Figure 1.** Illustration of a position as composed of not one but several roles, which in turn consist of tasks and behaviors (examples) expected to be fulfilled.

organizational levels. However, the behavior of prioritizing project-level activities (Chronéer & Backlund, 2015; Loo, 2002) indicates that the role of the project manager cannot encompass all expected tasks and behaviors, consequently forcing the project manager to prioritize.

Floyd and Lane (2000) argue that an organizational position, such as the project manager, can contain a number of roles, both primary and secondary. Primary roles are often formalized and related to the everyday practice of a position, whereas secondary roles support the organization's objectives but are often not explicitly defined and are more disconnected from the day-to-day practice of a position. A role can be defined as "the set of behaviors that others expect of individuals in a certain context" (Floyd & Lane, 2000, p. 157). For the project manager, the role is traditionally described as focusing on planning and delivering projects within time and budget (e.g., Lindkvist, Söderlund, & Tell, 1998; Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Floyd and Lane (2000) also emphasize that the more clearly expectations are expressed, the more likely the possessor of the role is to conform to the expectations; hence, formalization and articulation increase the likelihood of individuals (i.e., project managers) who adopt desired tasks and behaviors. Given the limited extent to which project managers seem to prioritize activities not directly related to project delivery, this article proposes that project management tasks and behaviors are divided into primary and secondary roles in a PBO. One secondary role, here termed the "improvement agent" (see Figure 1), that is, the project manager as a contributor to PBO-level improvement initiatives, is specifically targeted, and we argue that the improvement agent role is expected but not clearly expressed or formalized and, consequently, not fulfilled.

The need to explore this secondary project manager role was indicated in a case study in a subsidiary PBO (within the construction and engineering sector), suggesting that there are several expectations of project managers related to organization-level improvement work, which are neither clearly articulated nor fulfilled. Based on a literature overview and reflections from practice, the purpose of this study is to explore how this secondary role of a project manager, as an organization-level improvement agent in a PBO, is portrayed in the project management field. We know that PBO-level improvements are challenging to achieve (e.g., Kwak et al., 2015), but what do we know about the expectations on the project manager to contribute to these efforts? The project manager's role in PBO-level improvement work has received little or no attention in previous research. In order to address this issue, two questions are posed: What type of organization-level improvement work is required by a project manager in a PBO? And, how can the project manager role as an improvement agent be described?

## The Project Manager Role

By questioning the traditional approach to project management (see Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Winter, Smith, Morris, & Cicmil, 2006), new ways of understanding the role of the project manager have emerged. Pinto and Winch (2016) present one example of extending the role horizontally by arguing for

the need to include the project manager in early project phases, much earlier than the established bodies of knowledge suggest. Söderlund (2005) identifies six different project management roles from two successful projects: knowledge integrator, globalizer, and pacer, as well as time pacer, changer, and rhythm creator. These are examples of role extension for managing the single project.

Loufrani-Fedida and Missonier (2015), on the other hand, discuss project management competencies on multiple levels in PBOs, stating that responsibility should be shared rather than trying to find the "ideal" project manager. They highlight a lack of organizational and collective competencies in standards today, and as a consequence, the project manager needs to possess all desired project management competencies. Turner and Müller (2003) link the temporary organization to the permanent organization by identifying the project manager as an agent of the principal (the project owner), underlining the project manager's responsibility to align the project with the principal's strategy. Finally, Medina and Medina (2014) emphasize the project manager's role in the (project-oriented) organization's long-term goals in terms of competence and the importance of involving the project manager in this process, through changes in the project manager's role and responsibilities.

In contrast, Braun, Ferreira, and Sydow (2013) and Ekrot, Rank, and Gemünden (2016) have focused on more informal behavioral aspects of project members. Braun et al. (2013) focus on organizational citizenship behavior in projects, emphasizing, among other things, the value of having project managers who are committed beyond the single project, since such behavior can foster effectiveness beyond the triple constraint (i.e., cost, time, scope). Ekrot et al. (2016), in turn, discuss voice behavior (i.e., contribution to the long-term development of the organization) and stress the importance (or benefit) of having project managers who experience a sense of belonging and commitment to the organization (i.e., the PBO), because that fosters voice behavior. Both articles stress the importance of having project managers who contribute to the organization beyond the traditional single-project focus in order to achieve more long-term benefits (e.g., innovation and performance improvement).

The examples above illustrate descriptions of, additions to, or changes to the project manager role in project management literature. The examples both add nuance to and extend the role—horizontally, for example, by extending the engagement in the project to earlier phases and between projects by cooperation, and vertically, for example, by accounting for long-term strategy and by acting as an agent of the permanent organization (both company and PBO). However, adding tasks and behaviors to a role could result in overload, consequently forcing employees to prioritize activities. For the project manager, that would imply prioritizing tasks and behaviors associated with short-term project delivery and ignoring or neglecting activities associated with more long-term aspects, such as PBO improvement efforts.

## The Need to Improve at a PBO Level

Like other organizations, PBOs are encouraged to focus on continuous development and improvement, for example, by building competitive advantage through knowledge governance (e.g., Pemsel et al., 2016), by achieving organizational learning in order to avoid "reinventing the wheel" (Scarbrough et al., 2004), or by increasing project success through project management improvement (Fernandes et al., 2014). Furthermore, as projects have come to be strategic tools for organizations to create competitive advantage, project success has become a multidimensional strategic concept moving beyond the triple constraint (Shenhar et al., 2001). For project management to provide strategic value, aligning project outcomes with organizational strategy has proven important, covering both short-term operational aspects and the more intangible long-term strategic aspects (Müller & Jugdev, 2012). The general desire to improve project management practice is acknowledged in the project management literature (Jacobsson & Söderholm, 2011) but is also recognized as being difficult to achieve (cf. Fernandes et al., 2014; Scarbrough et al., 2004). Brady and Maylor (2010) provide some insight into the difficulties with organization-level (PBO) improvements, as they observed PBOs resisting change despite the need to improve, which is termed "the improvement paradox." They attributed this behavior to the existence of defensive routines as a way for organizational members to balance the uncertain nature of projects by seeking stability in the processes.

In order for organizations working with projects (e.g., PBOs) to improve their capability, the quality management concept of continuous improvement (CI) is promoted, both as a suitable component of project management work (PMI, 2008) and as the highest level of project management maturity (Kwak et al., 2015). Quality management principles are often built on a long-term strategic focus, a process approach, and with explicit roles regarding improvement work. In contrast, the prevailing focus in project management practice is described as short-term (project) execution and "getting the job done," resulting in negative consequences for the organization, such as misalignment with company strategy and a short-term focus (Patanakul & Shenhar, 2012). This indicates a misalignment between the recommended ways to work with improvements in project management literature and practice, raising the question: Does project management literature encompass the role of an improvement agent? To answer this question, an overview of project management literature within specific project management journals has been conducted, focusing on how the expectations of the project manager are described in regard to PBO improvement work.

## Method

The proposed project manager role of improvement agent is the result of repeated discussions with senior management as part of a case study regarding their efforts to develop and improve the PBO. Senior management described difficulties in

achieving PBO-wide improvements, since all PBO members were occupied with their respective projects. This spawned the question of how project management literature portrays project manager involvement in organization-level improvement efforts. A literature overview was performed targeting two of the leading project management journals, the *International Journal of Project Management* (*IJPM*) and the *Project Management Journal*® (*PMJ*). A keyword search (role, responsibility, best practice, improvement) was performed through ScienceDirect, spanning a 10-year period (2006–2016). In a later stage, one additional search was conducted to include the year 2017. The search generated 306 hits in *IJPM* and 79 hits in *PMJ*. Relevant articles were selected for further study based on title and abstract related to the role of a project manager, resulting in 78 articles from *IJPM* and 36 articles from *PMJ*. Relevant information was then extracted via read-throughs of the selected papers, focusing on descriptions related to or potentially affecting who project managers are and what they could or should be expected to do in their professional role. Relevant information from the project management articles was then manually coded using clustering, resulting in the themes *Strategy*, *Performance*, and *Knowledge and Learning*. By comparing Caffyn's (1999) 10 CI behaviors to how the role of the project manager is described in project management literature, an overview of existing and suggested project manager improvement behaviors was constructed (Table 2).

In order to complement and add nuance to the findings from the literature overview, data from a case study are introduced with examples to illustrate the phenomena of the project management roles (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Siggelkow, 2007). The setting for the case study was a subsidiary PBO within a Swedish mining company, working primarily with construction and engineering projects for the parent company. Initially gathered for the purpose of exploring efficiency and effectiveness in a PBO, the data were found suitable, since the discussions implicitly focused on the project manager and behavior in relation to improvement efforts. All respondents in the case PBO were permanent employees organized in five different project programs (A–E), all with different areas of focus but with a common set of goals, and regardless of position, all managed projects to some extent. The initial selection of the case was based on the characteristics of being a PBO working actively with improvements.

The data were collected between 2013 and 2016 and are summarized in Table 1. The observations focused on the PBO management team and program A to gain insight into both PBO and program-level activities and their efforts to develop the PBO and the respondents' interaction with colleagues, clients, and contractors (see Table 1). All data were recorded in the native language of Swedish. Selected examples and quotes have been translated into English.

**Table 1.** Case PBO Respondents and Data Collection Methods

| | |
|---|---|
| **Case PBO*** | PBO Management Team (6 respondents) |
| Main Respondents (13 in total) | PBO manager<br>Program manager A<br>Program manager B<br>Program manager C<br>Program manager D<br>Program manager E |
| | Program A (7 respondents excluding program manager)<br>5 Project managers (titled A-1–A-5)<br>2 Project coordinators (titled A-6–A-7) |
| *Total number of employees in the PBO approximately 100 | |
| **Data Collection Methods** | - Interviews<br>15 semistructured interviews, recorded (average one hour), and field notes (main respondents, PBO manager, and program manager A interviewed two times)<br>- Observations<br>Continual over four years, field notes, PBO management team meetings, program meetings, project meetings, coffee breaks (main respondents plus one additional project manager "C-1" from program C)<br>- Case study meetings<br>11 continual over four years, meeting protocols and field notes (6 participants: three researchers, PBO manager, program managers A and B)<br>- Documents<br>PBO business and operational plans from three consecutive years |

*Note*. Total number of employees in the PBO is approximately 100.

## Continuous Improvement (CI)

Continuous improvement (CI), simply defined as "a company-wide process of focused and continuous incremental innovation" (Bessant, Caffyn, Gilbert, Harding, & Webb, 1994, p.18), is a quality management concept with roots in several fields (Bessant, Caffyn, & Gallagher, 2001). As a concept, CI refers both to the outcomes and to the process through which the outcomes can be achieved and does not exist as either/or but as something evolving (Bessant et al., 2001). Jørgensen, Boer, and Gertsen (2003) describe CI in practice as occurring when all members of an organization contribute to improving performance by continuously implementing small changes in their work processes. A central aspect of CI is the collective and holistic understanding of the organization's direction, guiding the improvement work with a focus on processes. Underlying values also include a customer focus, involvement and support from management, and processes at the center of attention (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005; Kaye & Anderson, 1999). Caffyn (1999) identified 10 key behaviors that increase the potential of succeeding with CI (Table 2), which include a holistic and collective approach (behaviors 1, 2, and 10) and the contribution to improvements by everyone in the organization, as individuals and as a group (behaviors 5, 6, 7, and 8; see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Caffyn's (1999) 10 CI Behaviors

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Employees demonstrate awareness and understanding of the organization's aims and objectives. |
| 2. | Individuals and groups use the organization's strategic goals and objectives to focus and prioritize their improvement activities. |
| 3. | The enabling mechanisms (e.g., training, teamwork, methodologies) used to encourage CI are monitored and developed. |
| 4. | Ongoing assessment ensures that the organization's structure, systems, and procedures, as well as the approach and mechanisms used to develop CI, consistently reinforce and support each other. |
| 5. | Managers at all levels display active commitment to and leadership of CI. |
| 6. | Throughout the organization, people engage proactively in incremental improvement. |
| 7. | There is effective work across internal and external boundaries at all levels. |
| 8. | People learn from their own and others' experiences, both positive and negative. |
| 9. | The learning of individuals and groups is captured and deployed. |
| 10. | People are guided by a shared set of cultural values that underpin CI as they go about their everyday work. |

Caffyn's (1999) CI behaviors are related to, and form a basis for, what is known as Bessant's model of CI, which is still applied today (Fryer, Ogden, & Anthony, 2013). Current research has shifted focus toward discussing CI as a dynamic capability and how to achieve CI, but the basic components of CI remain the same (Anand, Ward, Tatikonda, & Schilling, 2009; Fryer et al., 2013; Galeazzo, Furlan, & Vinelli, 2017). Since the purpose of this research is not to evaluate the extent to which CI is achieved, but to understand if the basic prerequisites are promoted or exist within project management, the behaviors (see Table 2) are considered to be relevant and applicable.

According to Bhuiyan and Baghel (2005), some of the behaviors supporting CI have been found difficult to practice due to organizations tending to have a hard time adopting a new mindset. Bessant et al. (1994) stress the complexity of making CI work, despite the seemingly simple definition. CI is an organization-wide task requiring a high level of commitment and support throughout the organization (Bessant et al., 1994), but criticism has been raised as a result of organizations experiencing disappointment and failure, caused by failure to understand the behavioral dimension of CI (Bessant et al., 2001). Bhuiyan and Baghel (2005) conclude that Caffyn's (1999) identified behaviors grasp the key factors for achieving CI but emphasize the need to allow for monitoring and development over time.

If the concept of CI is to be adopted in a PBO, then the project manager corresponds to the employee (organizational member) in CI literature. If the PBO also operates as a subsidiary, there would only be one primary "customer," the parent organization. The aims, objectives, and strategy of the parent organization will then dictate the perceived value delivered by the PBO and should consequently guide everyday work. From a quality management perspective, the project manager is expected to fulfill (at least) two different roles in the PBO to (1) deliver projects and (2) participate in and contribute to organizational (process) improvement, a conclusion similar to Bowen, Clark, Holloway, and Wheelwright's (1994) statement regarding project goals (successful delivery, progressed organizational learning). The following section presents the findings from both the project management literature overview and the case study related to Caffyn's (1999) 10 CI behaviors.

## The Project Manager and Improvement Work

This section presents the findings from the literature overview, focusing on understanding how the project manager is expected to work with and contribute to organizational improvements. Since articles explicitly discussing improvement work were limited, the following section presents articles that discuss the project manager role in comparison to the previously described CI behaviors. Three main themes—*Strategy*, *Performance*, and *Knowledge and Learning*—emerged during the analysis. The role of the project manager, regarding working with improvements, is discussed in relation to each theme below.

### *Strategy*

For the first identified theme—strategy—a general agreement seems to be the need to align projects with overall strategy, ensuring project contribution to achieving the long-term goals of the organization. Project teams should (and could) be asked to do more than focus on project delivery (Patanakul & Shenhar, 2012). Complementing the traditional strong focus on project delivery with an understanding and inclusion of the needs of the higher enterprise is suggested, in order to better achieve business results and create greater customer satisfaction (Patanakul & Shenhar, 2012). Patanakul and Shenhar (2012) argue that, in order to make the transition from a traditional approach (the triple constraint) to the strategic approach, a shift in mindset is required, both for project managers and higher level management. Although they discuss project teams, the project manager's role in learning and understanding the needs of the higher enterprise, and planning and executing projects accordingly is explicated. Patanakul and Shenhar's (2012) suggestions are related and similar to the behaviors of including and focusing on contributions to overall strategy (behaviors 1 and 2), learning (behaviors 8 and 9), and satisfaction (i.e., customer value) (behavior 10).

Similarly, effective management of single projects is considered insufficient to guarantee organization- or company-level success. The evaluation of project contributions to achieving organizational strategy is therefore suggested as a complement to the assessment of budget and plan (Dietrich & Lehtonen, 2005). This is one of few findings related to assessment (behavior 4), arguing for the need of additional variables in order to understand "success." Consequently, the

**Table 3.** Caffyn's (1999) 10 CI behaviors, Corresponding Findings From the Project Management Literature, and Insights From Practice, Either Describing an Existing Behavior or a Request to Change the Project Management Behavior, in Line With the CI Behaviors

| | Identified as Existing | | Identified as Requested (desired change) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Caffyn's (1999) 10 CI Behaviors | Project Management Literature | Practice | Project Management Literature | Practice |
| 1 Employees demonstrate awareness and understanding of the organization's aims and objectives. | | | Cao & Hoffman (2011); Chronéer & Backlund (2015); Dietrich & Lehtonen (2005); Görög (2011); Patanakul & Shenhar (2012) | x |
| 2 Individuals and groups use the organization's strategic goals and objectives to focus and prioritize their improvement activities. | | | Cao & Hoffman (2011); Chronéer & Backlund (2015); Dietrich & Lehtonen (2005); Görög (2011); Patanakul & Shenhar (2012) | x |
| 3 The enabling mechanisms (e.g., training, teamwork, methodologies) used to encourage CI are monitored and developed. | | | [Thomas & Mengel (2008)]* | |
| 4 Ongoing assessment ensures that the organization's structure, systems, and procedures, as well as the approach and mechanisms used to develop CI, consistently reinforce and support each other. | Besner & Hobbs (2013); Thamhain (2013); Yazici (2009) | x* | Dietrich & Lehtonen (2005) | x |
| 5 Managers at all levels display active commitment to and leadership of CI. | | [x]** | | [x]** |
| 6 Throughout the organization, people engage proactively in incremental improvement. | Hyväri (2006) | | Anantatmula (2008); Görög (2011); Lee-Kelley & Blackman (2012); Luu et al. (2008); Pemsel & Wiewiora (2013); Winter et al. (2006) | x |
| 7 There is effective work across internal and external boundaries at all levels. | | | | |
| 8 People learn from their own and others' experiences, both positive and negative. | Hyväri (2006); Pemsel & Müller (2012); Pemsel & Wiewiora (2013) | [x]** | Anantatmula (2008); Cao & Hoffman (2011); Chronéer & Backlund (2015); Lee-Kelley & Blackman (2012); Luu et al. (2008); Patanakul & Shenhar (2012); Pemsel & Wiewiora (2013); Walker & Dart (2011); Winter et al. (2006) | x |
| 9 The learning of individuals and groups is captured and deployed. | | | | |
| 10 People are guided by a shared set of cultural values that underpin CI as they go about their everyday work. | | | Patanakul & Shenhar (2012); Pinto & Winch (2016) | [x]** |

*Note.* x* indicates findings from data. **Entries in brackets indicate limited findings.

project manager needs to be prepared for the evaluation of project contribution to organizational strategy.

Furthermore, Morris, Jamieson, and Shepard (2006) acknowledge the need to link projects more clearly to a business's purposes as well as to add increased understanding of value management. They also discuss the need to emphasize learning and development in relation to people factors, since projects start and end with people. More emphasis on learning and development suggests including new (additional) tasks and behaviors for the project manager as well as strengthening already existing ones. Similarly, as stated by Pinto and Winch (2016), the purpose of every project should aim to maximize stakeholder value, indicating that the long-term effects and contribution of the project should be the first priority for the project manager, a finding supporting a focus on customer value (behavior 10).

To summarize, strategic alignment should be coordinated between individual projects, between project and program/portfolio, and with PBO-level management. Projects, and hence project managers, are primarily evaluated based on time, cost, and scope. Several of the findings in the project management literature emphasize the need to complement the triple constraint with contributions to business purpose and overall organizational strategy, adding both awareness of and practice according to a superordinate process that includes goals and strategy. As a consequence, the role of the project manager is widened, moving from a focus on short-term delivery to long-term strategy. Findings related to strategy were in line with CI behaviors 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10, as well as 4, to a limited extent (see Table 3).

## *Performance*

The second identified theme related to the project manager role is performance. Project management performance usually refers to the common definition of budget and deadline

compliance together with scope delivery (i.e., the triple constraint). According to Aubry (2015), these metrics only provide a partial view of overall project performance, and more aspects are needed in order to understand project management performance.

Leadership behavior among project managers has been studied from a single-project perspective (Chen & Lee, 2007; Hyväri, 2006). Hyväri (2006) identifies *planning/structuring* and *networking and informing* as the most significant managerial practices for project managers regarding project effectiveness and performance. Despite a single-project focus, some of the identified behaviors and practices could also potentially be useful outside the single project, for example, *building relationships*, *giving and seeking information*, and, similarly, *networking and informing*. These behaviors and practices also correspond to the CI behaviors of cooperation and sharing of lessons learned (behaviors 8 and 9). Traditionally, project managers are often asked to manage information or to find solutions to problems in their projects on their own (Chen & Lee, 2007), instead of cooperating between projects, or to share information in networks, extending the single project (e.g., the PBO), as promoted in CI (behaviors 7, 8, and 9). Effective project management seems to be treated as being confined to the single project—not clearly considered as (potentially) affected by historic events or potentially affecting future events or concurrent projects, for that matter.

In the context of construction projects, Luu, Kim, and Huynh (2008) promote CI as a suggested part of project management practice, without mentioning how to apply it more specifically. Focusing on benchmarking as a way to improve project management performance, Luu et al. (2008) argue for the combination of CI and benchmarking as a way to strengthen project management in construction firms (i.e., to learn from others). Anantatmula (2008) extends the performance discussion outside the single project by discussing how technology can aid project manager interaction, consequently promoting cooperation between project managers (behaviors 7, 8, and 9). He also suggests that project managers must perform project reviews throughout the project management life cycle in order to effectively capture lessons learned and, by extension, improve performance. Hence, the need to work not just within but also between projects, in parallel and over time, is emphasized. This consequently promotes a holistic and cooperative approach similar to what is promoted in CI (behaviors 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9).

Several findings also challenge the traditional role of the project manager by suggesting a widened approach to project management. Walker and Dart (2011) argue for the advantages of focusing on long-term customer benefits and business sustainability rather than on the (traditional) triple constraint. Others suggest broadening the competence base of the project manager to also include reflective management in order to increase organizational effectiveness (Lee-Kelley & Blackman, 2012; Winter et al., 2006)—a call in line with the CI behaviors of, for example, organizational awareness and the sharing of lessons learned (behaviors 1, 2, 8, and 10). Despite having different foci (general project management and project management training), Winter et al. (2006) and Lee-Kelley and Blackman (2012) similarly stress the need to challenge and change the traditional approach to project management. A reflective practice in this sense includes approaching the project in its context and continually reviewing what is and has been done and what contributions have been made to the context (i.e., customer and organization). In order to include reflective practice, such reshaping boundary objects as "best practice" models, "bodies of knowledge," processes, and the project management vocabulary (Lee-Kelley & Blackman, 2012), as well as shifting focus from product to value creation (Winter et al., 2006), are suggested. A reflective practice with a focus on context, long-term performance, and value creation corresponds to a quality management approach as CI, in terms of adopting a holistic approach focused on value creation (behaviors 1, 2, and 10). Based on the described shortcomings, it is also an indication of the misalignment between current project management practice and the practice of CI. The call to include reflective practice can be seen as a suggestion to adopt quality management principles in a project management context, since reviewing current practice for the purpose of future improvements is, in many ways, the core of (incremental) improvement work.

For multiproject settings (e.g., PBOs), Görög (2011) emphasizes the potential importance of projects and project-related operations to the overall performance of the organization, stressing, among other things, the need for a long-term perspective (strategy) in projects too. Connecting projects to each other indicates the potential to work both across projects and between PBO levels to increase performance (e.g., through cooperation). Görög's (2011) arguments are in line with CI in terms of focusing on a higher order purpose (overall strategy) and cooperating between both projects and PBO levels (behaviors 1, 2, 8, and 10). Emphasizing the need for a long-term perspective could also imply the need for a dialogue between project and program managers in order to understand and align their undertakings with the overall strategy of the organization and to collectively improve the overall performance of the organization (cf. Aubry & Hobbs, 2011).

Project management maturity is one of few findings related to assessment of performance, in terms of capability, on an organizational level (cf. Aubry, 2015). Yazici (2009), for example, emphasizes that an increase in project management maturity (along with a results-oriented culture) leads to improvements (e.g., increased competitiveness and cost savings). However, she also reports on several previous studies that indicate little or no significant relationship between project management maturity and performance. Project management maturity models can be described as management tools for senior management to evaluate project management capabilities, focusing on project management processes (Backlund, Chronéer, & Sundqvist, 2015). According to Yazici (2009), the highest level of project management maturity is "optimizing

process," meaning an organization focusing on improving (project management) processes through lessons learned and CI. From the project manager perspective, this would imply fully adopting all CI behaviors, including taking part in or being the subject of assessment (e.g., through project management maturity models). Yazici (2009) found that project management maturity, together with a results-oriented culture, in fact improved competitiveness. Hence, a culture based on sharing, collaboration, and empowerment, which are central values of quality management (including CI), is promoted.

Moving back to the single-project perspective, Besner and Hobbs (2008) promote extending the project manager role to be part of the shaping of project requirements, since front-end participation shows a strong contribution toward project success. They describe project manager (or program director) participation in front-end activities as a distinguishing factor of high-performing organizations (in their case, innovation projects). Consequently, including front-end participation in the project management process is suggested, thus extending the role of the project manager. The findings related to performance indicate a dominant focus on (single) project performance, with several suggestions to extend performance to include both project and organizational performance, from the perspectives of the project, program/portfolio, and PBO, respectively. However, practical examples of how organizational performance can be incorporated into project management practice seem to be missing. In conclusion, the findings related to performance were in line with CI behaviors 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 (see Table 3).

### *Knowledge and Learning*

The third theme identified centers around knowledge and learning. Walker and Dart (2011) highlight the need for shared client–contractor co-knowledge generation, thus arguing for active dialogue between project manager (and team members) and client. Generating, accessing, and sharing knowledge is thus seen as part of project management practice, both within and between projects, as well as between projects and the PBO. Consequently, the sharing of knowledge from project to PBO is promoted as part of the project manager role, similar to a CI approach (e.g., behaviors 7, 8, and 9). The suggested increased focus on client interaction could be related to an increased focus on customer value. Project managers today tend to be judged primarily based on the triple constraint (Walker & Dart, 2011), consequently placing less emphasis on how the (project) outcome contributes to customer benefits (it is suggested that increased benefits lead to increased perceived value).

Pemsel and Wiewiora (2013) recognize the importance of transferring new ideas, challenges, and learning gained from projects to the PBO. They observed that project managers gave low priority to everything not considered directly related to their project(s). In this case, it was about knowledge-sharing and lessons-learned documentation (only doing the minimum to "check the box"). They also describe knowledge transferring as ineffective, stressing the need to ensure effective knowledge sharing and integration within and between projects. From an improvement perspective, this implicitly positions the project managers as key contributors to PBO improvement, since they are in a position to bridge these subgroups (behaviors 8 and 9). Similarly, the authors' description of the project management office as a knowledge broker indicates the need to work in accordance with behaviors 8 and 9, to capture and deploy learning.

Moreover, project managers were found to share experiences but preferred face-to-face interaction instead of writing and reviewing lessons learned (Pemsel & Wiewiora, 2013). This resistance to documenting lessons learned among project managers also includes the evaluation of leadership and customer care, while aspects related to time, budget, and technology tend to be easily reported (Pemsel & Müller, 2012). These findings underline the importance of project manager engagement in learning activities, similar to CI behaviors. Similarly, Fernie, Green, Weller, and Newcombe (2003) explicitly assign the responsibility of improving knowledge sharing between project members and across teams to the project manager, since it has been shown to build competitive advantage. The responsibility is, however, only explicitly described in a single-project setting. The project manager is implicitly described as the one who should transfer or share generated knowledge from projects with the PBO but fails to do so (at least in a formal manner), as indicated by the findings regarding resistance to documenting lessons learned (Pemsel & Müller, 2012). The need for project managers to feed information back to the PBO (behaviors 8 and 9) is further supported by the findings (e.g., Ahern, Leavy, & Byrne, 2014; Fernie et al., 2003; McClory, Read, & Labib, 2017).

Project management research also highlights the need to share lessons learned with the organization, since the project manager can have a strong impact on organizational learning (Chronéer & Backlund, 2015; Müller et al., 2013). Respondents in one study mentioned lack of time as a hindrance to contributing to organizational learning and improvement (Chronéer & Backlund, 2015), indicating a lack of formal requirements to share lessons learned. In line with the role of improvement agent, Chronéer and Backlund (2015) also point out the need for structures, processes, and culture to be in place to support learning. This can be interpreted as the need to formalize other activities than those not directly related to project delivery, in their case, sharing lessons learned (behaviors 8 and 9).

Besides highlighting the link between the project and organizational level, Chronéer and Backlund (2015) also emphasize the need for a link between projects to share lessons learned for the purpose of improving the collective project management capability (cf. Cao & Hoffman, 2011; Kozak-Holland & Procter, 2014). The purpose of cross-project learning is described to bring about improved project management practices (Cao & Hoffman, 2011), similar to the promotion of cooperation and learning in CI

(behaviors 6, 7, 8, and 9). However, no responsibility for cross-project learning is discussed.

Transferring knowledge and sharing lessons learned from the project back to the PBO is considered important but difficult to achieve in practice. Individuals at all levels of the PBO need to take an active role in sharing knowledge and lessons learned. The project manager is expected to manage both knowledge and learning within the project and from the project to the PBO, for the purpose of strengthening organizational project management capability and performance. However, the findings indicate that the transfer of knowledge back to the PBO only occurs to a limited and informal extent. No findings were made related to formal evaluation of the management of or participation in knowledge and learning activities. Findings related to knowledge and learning were in line with CI behaviors 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 (see Table 3).

## A Case of Improvement Efforts in a PBO

From the case study material, observations and interviews provided insights and illustrations of a PBO's expectations on project managers' behavior in accordance with the role of an improvement agent. Both descriptions and observations of behavior associated with improvement work from the PBO, as exemplified by Caffyn's (1999) 10 CI behaviors (see section on continuous improvement), are provided to give insights of expectations related to the improvement agent role.

### *Strategy*

The PBO's ability to deliver ("good") projects (performance) that served the right purpose for the parent company (strategic alignment) dominated the discussions regarding improvements. Projects were initiated in different divisions and departments of the company, or by top management, making them primarily responsible for aligning projects with overall strategy, hence, leaving the project manager out of the loop. Three managers (PBO, A, and B) stated that projects without strategic alignment risked resulting in suboptimization, due to clients prioritizing their own needs over company needs and that such situations could be avoided through active dialogue between the PBO and the client.

According to the PBO manager: "Our mission is to deliver efficient and effective projects," and "we need to move beyond strictly adhering to the project plan," stressing the need to also consider the strategic aspects of the project. Further emphasizing this, the PBO manager stated: "I do not want to hear 'It was not included in the plan,' then you have not understood your role," stressing the need for all PBO members to consider the strategic aspects of project management. However, program manager A stated; "The focus among project managers is probably around 99% operative," referring to project managers prioritizing short-term delivery.

One example of value of early phase involvement is when the PBO manager and program manager A did not follow the normal routines of project commissioning by starting a dialogue with the client before receiving the project order. By engaging early in the project phase of problem identification, the two senior managers managed to contribute to a revamped project idea that would eventually save both time and resources yet still maintain the required effect of the project. These insights indicate an existing desire to focus on strategic alignment, illustrate limited attempts taken, and identify a potential barrier to be the lack of responsibility for and limited influence over strategic alignment (behaviors 1, 2, and 6). This example can also be seen as a case of senior managers leading by example, as promoted by behavior 5.

It is noteworthy that the senior managers discussed strategy in terms of the parent company strategy, but also in terms of the PBO strategy. The latter focused on efficient and effective project delivery and responsibility for company resources, while the former focused on the long-term survival of the company and how to support it (project outcome and strategic alignment). The main body of the discussions regarding improvements concerned PBO-level strategy and how the PBO could increase their performance to best support the company.

### *Performance*

Regarding performance, the PBO manager and two program managers (A and B) described frustration regarding project evaluation; the triple constraint was considered insufficient for evaluating project performance. Budget and plan compliance were described as good measures of performance in relation to the agreed-upon project variables but as insufficient regarding resources spent on the (overall) company level (e.g., alternative investments and strategic alignment). Insufficient metrics made visualization of the benefits of having in-house project management competence difficult (as opposed to hiring consultants or outsourcing). Although current practice focused on the triple constraint, the aspiration to evaluate performance over time and on a multiproject level is in line with a holistic approach of process improvement and value creation (behaviors 1, 2, and 10). In addition, the PBO had previously implemented a project management maturity model as a way of assessing the overall project management capability and performance, as well as identifying areas in need of improvements. As the project management maturity evaluation was based on input from project managers through a survey, the evaluation, in some way, acted as a bridge from the project to the PBO level. However, current improvement efforts were few in number and rather comprehensive (not in line with CI, e.g., behavior 6). These findings indicate an approach in line with ongoing assessment (behavior 4) and a general striving to achieve CI as part of the highest level of project management maturity (cf. Yazici, 2009).

After project initiation, the primary focus seemed to be directed toward time and budget compliance. The long-term

effect of the project was described as the responsibility of the project owner, limiting the project manager's (and the PBO's) influence on project contribution. Prerequisites for and the potential outcomes of projects were considered to more or less correspond with the level of project management knowledge and experience among the owners; greater knowledge and experience resulted in "better" projects. Variation of project management knowledge and commitment among owners was considered one of the major issues affecting the perceived project performance and strategic alignment. Low degree of project management knowledge and lack of commitment often lead to more change requests, misunderstandings, and difficulties in complying with plan and budget. The insights indicate a desire to work according to the CI behaviors, but difficulties in succeeding. When asked what was needed to increase long-term project performance, one senior project manager replied: "We need more time in early project phases to explore alternatives." The answer referred to early phase influence in order to better align the project with the overall strategy of the company to work with the best interest of the company in mind (e.g., see the strategy section), in line with behaviors 1, 2, and 10.

The need to complement project performance with organizational performance in order to account for both short- and long-term performance of the organization indicates a desire to work in accordance with behaviors 1 and 2 and work with and improve processes toward company strategy.

### *Knowledge and Learning*

While performance and strategy relate to *what* to improve, knowledge and learning relates more to *how* to improve. In the case of the PBO, the theme knowledge and learning proved to be both important and problematic. The PBO manager and two program managers (A and B) mentioned competitiveness when asked about the reasons why the sharing of lessons learned was considered important. The PBO manager felt obligated to be able to justify having in-house project management competence, compared to the alternative: employing external project managers. The ability to learn from and have access to previous projects and to possess company-specific knowledge was considered a competitive advantage. In order to build and keep the competitive edge, the ability to learn, in order to ensure an efficient and effective project management process, was emphasized. None of the respondents mentioned measuring learning specifically; however, the use of a project management maturity model could be seen as one way to measure knowledge and learning (although not explicated). The general agreement seemed to be that learning is important but not prioritized. Thus, learning is considered important but hard to achieve, indicating a desire to work, according to the proposed behaviors (2, 6, 7, 8, and 9).

Documentation of lessons learned was tried as part of project reports, primarily the final reports, but was reported as often being short and inadequate, generally minimally completed only to "check the box."

Program manager D stated in an interview: "I think we have 200 projects going [in total]. In my program, we have 60 projects; what are the odds of me having the energy to read a report from [another program]? It will be down prioritized rather fast." The respondent further stated that reading reports was only done when a similar project was to be repeated.

When completed, the content was described as dominated by a few good examples only, leaving mistakes out. No clear explanations were given as to why the documentation was inadequate or brief. Speculation from respondents pointed out the unwillingness to expose mistakes as one factor, moreover claiming to be open to and preferring sharing mistakes informally (i.e., face-to-face with colleagues, if approached). As with the project reports, lessons learned were added as a formal part of project meeting agendas, explained as a way of reminding all PBO members to actively share important lessons. Despite good intentions, lessons learned were last on the agenda and repeatedly got crossed off the list, due to lack of time, according to program manager B.

To exemplify how improvement work was manifested, program manager D argued: "There is a difference between the equipment we build, and the process we build it with."

Program manager B further described this division of practice: "We are good at finding alternative solutions in our projects, but poor at finding alternative ways of delivering the solutions." In other words, program manager B considered the PBO to be good at finding alternative solutions within projects but poor at improving or finding new ways to deliver projects (the project management process).

Regarding informal sharing of knowledge and learning, the findings highlight the role of improvement agent, both as active and passive. The first example was found by observing project manager C-1 during different project meetings, regarding the rebuilding of a production unit. In a construction meeting with contractors, the identified cause of delay was discussed with the purpose of finding a solution; a critical part in the process was missing, and the lead time for one far exceeded the project deadline. The cause of the mistake was identified to be unrevised blueprints (a discarded part, and slow company routine for updates), and the design was not verified on-site (not requested in the project management process). The subsequent meeting was with the project steering group, of which program manager C was a member. In this meeting, project manager C-1 described the cause of the problem to program manager C (i.e., the slow company update process and the need to do on-site verification, meaning a transfer of lessons from a project to the PBO level). This can be seen as an example of when the project manager actively contributes to (potential) PBO-level improvement. The information could be used to avoid future mistakes, such as improving company routines for updating blueprints or requiring verification of designs on-site.

The second example is from individual interviews with program managers C and D. While discussing CI, the respondents

explained that, by staying updated on their project managers' work, they sometimes identified deviations from the company project management guide. In this case, current practice outperformed the standard, which led the program managers to initiate an update of the guide. This can be seen as an example of when the project managers passively contribute to PBO-level improvement work. The update could then be implemented throughout the PBO.

These insights are in line with behaviors 6, 7, 8 and 9, indicating both a desire and a need to share lessons learned and improve processes as well as the difficulties in doing so. The sharing of lessons learned was described as important but not prioritized, since activities related to learning seemed marginalized. The mutually shared idea of the outcome from learning appears to be efficiency and effectiveness of project delivery. From the project manager perspective, the insights indicate a need to actively share knowledge, experience, and lessons learned with colleagues for the purpose of organizational learning (and competitiveness). No respondent could provide a conclusive answer as to why the sharing did not work in a satisfactory manner.

The findings from project management literature and from practice, in relation to Caffyn's (1999) 10 CI behaviors, are presented in Table 3. The findings corresponding to each behavior are sorted based on origin (project management literature or practice) and whether they describe an existing behavior or request a change in project manager behavior. In the following sections, the findings are discussed in relation to the proposed project management role of improvement agent.

## Analysis of Behaviors

A summary of the findings from project management literature, together with the reflections from practice, is presented in Table 3. On a general level, Table 3 illustrates the emphasis on an extended or changed behavior for the project manager role, from both project management literature and empirical findings. In the following section, the findings are discussed in regard to the proposed project manager role of improvement agent.

### *Strategy, Performance, and Knowledge and Learning*

Based on the identified themes, the findings indicate the need to extend both focus and behavior related to performance beyond the single project, evaluating project long-term contribution to a higher order purpose (e.g., Görög, 2011). Both the project management literature and the insights from practitioners seem to indicate a need to account for company strategy in every project to ensure the intended business outcomes (e.g., Morris et al., 2006). Findings under the themes of performance and strategy primarily related to what should guide the project manager's behavior (i.e., to focus more on the long term and evaluate performance accordingly, rather than to focus only on the triple constraint). Strategy and performance can be seen as guiding the improvement work, while knowledge and learning can be seen as part of organizational improvement in terms of input to and basis for improvement initiatives to strengthen and improve the project management capability (Pemsel & Wiewiora, 2013).

### *Project Manager CI Behaviors (Existing and Requested)*

Few findings indicate that all CI behaviors are part of current project management practice, suggesting that, although promoted, CI is not realized or formalized in the field. The findings, both in project management literature and in practice, indicate that it is desirable to have project managers partake in PBO-level improvement initiatives in line with CI, but that it is neither a prioritized activity nor formalized. Within current project management practice and existing behaviors of the project manager, knowledge and learning constituted the majority of the findings in the research literature. The sharing of lessons learned was described as existing primarily in informal ways (e.g., Hyväri, 2006). Hyväri's (2006) discussion regarding project manager leadership behavior also indicates the existence of cooperation (behaviors 6 and 7) to some extent. Insights from practice provided similar indications, whereby project managers did share lessons learned, primarily informally, but to a limited extent. Both the sharing of experience and cooperation seemed to be initiated in an informal, face-to-face manner rather than as part of any formal project management process.

Several findings in project management literature suggest the need to change the project manager's behavior in various aspects, consequently extending the role beyond a single-project focus. Several authors, as well as respondents, argued for the inclusion of aspects related to CI behaviors, such as the need to align projects with overall aims, objectives, and strategy (e.g., Görög, 2011), to improve processes accordingly (e.g., Chronéer & Backlund, 2015), as well as to learn from experience and share those lessons (e.g., Pemsel & Wiewiora, 2013). On an overall level, the request to further include reflective practice in project management (e.g., Lee-Kelley & Blackman, 2012) supports the need for project managers to learn from the past and present in order to improve for the future.

Limited findings relate to the assessment of improvement (behavior 4), but Dietrich and Lehtonen (2005) emphasize the need to evaluate projects—thus, indirectly, the project manager—on the connection to business purpose and overall strategy. The case study management team argued similarly, seeking a way to evaluate both efficiency and effectiveness as well as to place more emphasis on the long-term effect delivered through the project. Concerns were expressed regarding the restrictions inherent in evaluating projects solely on time, cost, and scope, a problem related to responsibility and ownership, according to the management team. The responsibility for strategic alignment and follow-up belonged to the project owner, with little or no involvement of the project manager (or PBO), and the long-term follow up of project

effect (outcome) was described to be varying at best. While Dietrich and Lehtonen (2005) suggest that evaluations focus on the project level, the project management maturity models evaluate project management capability on an organizational level (e.g., Yazici, 2009). As tools for assessing the current state of operations, the project management maturity models should be considered part of (and in relation to) an ongoing improvement process (Backlund et al., 2015). The fact that CI is part of the highest level of project management maturity (Kwak et al., 2015) is an indication of the aspiration to have project managers actively participating in PBO-level improvement efforts.

### *Summary*

The most common call for broadening the project manager role was found to be a change of focus, including strategic perspective and value creation in projects (behaviors 1, 2, and 10) and the need to share lessons learned, both horizontally and vertically, in the PBO (behaviors 6, 7, 8, and 9). Limited findings were made regarding explicit calls for the project manager to engage in improvement practice outside the single project (behavior 2), to be subjected to (or part of) assessment of improvement (behavior 4), and to receive support and guidance from PBO management (behavior 5). Findings from the literature and insights from practice present both explicit and implicit expectations on the project manager to contribute to organizational improvement efforts in line with the improvement agent role. The findings also indicate that the improvement agent role is vague or non-existing, since the majority of findings call for a changed behavior rather than descriptions of current practice. Further, the project manager role focuses on the project level, while contribution to PBO-level activities are limited or even avoided, as suggested by Brady and Maylor's (2010) improvement paradox.

## Discussion

Given the number of calls found in this article to extend the project manager role, it is clear that it is suggested (and expected) that the project manager do more than meet project requirements. However, the triple constraint is still present as the main focus, seemingly superseding any tasks or behaviors not directly related to project delivery. Following the role description provided by Floyd and Lane (2000), the tasks and behaviors not directly related to project delivery (e.g., learning behavior and strategic alignment) could be seen as secondary, as they support the organization's objectives and are more disconnected from the day-to-day practice of a project manager (i.e., meeting project requirements). Role fulfillment and conformance to expectations is related to how clearly a role is articulated (Floyd & Lane, 2000). The project managers deprioritizing lessons-learned activities, reported by Chronéer and Backlund (2015), and the statements regarding having to conduct improvement initiatives during private time (Loo, 2002) are examples that indicate a lack of formalization (articulation) of behaviors related to organizational improvement. Visualizing and formalizing the tasks and behaviors associated with organizational (PBO) improvement efforts could potentially increase project manager conformance. We suggest that the role of improvement agent could be one way of doing this, consequently defining and focusing the project management role on project delivery and ascribing unrelated tasks and behaviors to the improvement agent role (as one of potentially several other roles).

When it comes to how the project manager and PBO should act in order to implement the role of improvement agent, some general suggestions can be made. A strong single-project focus needs to be balanced out with a long-term perspective, as suggested by Müller and Jugdev (2012). Senior management needs to realize the role through assigning formal responsibility to the project managers as well as providing support, follow-up, and evaluation. Additionally, organization-specific metrics need to be developed in order to evaluate performance beyond the triple constraint, for example, related to learning, strategic alignment, and cooperation. The evaluation should also encompass project contribution to the business purpose and overall strategy, to realize the strategic value of projects as argued by Shenhar et al. (2001). The PBO needs to identify activities to support the behaviors, for example, by ensuring a no-blame culture, and to provide project manager with prerequisites to incorporate the described behaviors in their daily work. The implications for a project manager in a subsidiary PBO include extending the performance focus from the single project to what the project contributes to the company (long-term effect), as well as being aware of project performance in relation to PBO performance, and coordinating the work toward a collective goal (company strategy).

From a project manager perspective, assuming the role of improvement agent in line with CI would involve (behavior 1) having awareness and understanding of the organization's (PBO and/or client) aims and objectives, (behavior 6) proactively engaging in incremental process improvement (behavior 2) in line with said strategic goals and objectives, (behavior 4) taking part in and being the subject of assessment of improvements, and (behaviors 7, 8, and 9) learning from both one's own and others' good and bad experiences that are actively shared through cooperation and effective work across internal and external boundaries. Supported by (behavior 5) committed senior managers who lead by example and (behavior 3) who create and uphold the necessary prerequisites (e.g., training, teamwork), the project manager (behavior 10) bases everyday work on a shared set of cultural values that underpin CI.

CI might not be the answer to moving forward in project management practice in order to increase project success rate, as it has been criticized as being difficult to sustain over time (Bessant et al., 1994). However, CI stresses the importance of organizational support, which has been proven to contribute to increased employee commitment and contributions to long-term organizational improvement efforts (Ekrot et al., 2016).

Consequently, by formalizing an improvement agent role, a PBO could foster project manager behaviors, benefiting both the project and organizational levels, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Braun et al., 2013) and voice behavior (Ekrot et al., 2016). Further, a concept similar to CI could support managing Brady and Maylor's (2010) improvement paradox, as the incremental approach is less disruptive than radical changes, thus maintaining a low level of uncertainty in processes. Finally, the findings indicate a lack of formal project manager involvement in moving project management value from providing operational value only to fulfilling the strategic value ascribed to project management (Müller & Jugdev, 2012; Shenhar et al., 2001). As applied here, the concept of CI helps with understanding implicit expectations of project managers to work with organizational improvement and the lack of formal structures to support them. If CI is something toward which PBOs should strive, as suggested by standards and maturity models, then a structured approach is needed, and related activities have to be prioritized to balance the strong focus on project delivery. If CI is no longer considered important, then alternative approaches might be needed in order to ensure strategic alignment and future value creation.

## Conclusions

We argue that there is a general desire in project management literature and practice for the project manager to participate in PBO improvement initiatives, but that, in reality, priority is given to activities directly related to project delivery. Furthermore, the project manager is implicitly expected to act as an improvement agent in PBOs and contribute to strengthening the collective project management capability. Thus, the existence of an additional project management role, the improvement agent, is suggested. However, this role is neither explicitly discussed in project management literature nor implemented and formalized in practice.

The chosen approach has its limitations; for example, priority was given to depth at the expense of breadth, limiting the literature overview to two journals (*Project Management Journal*® and *International Journal of Project Management*) and a time span between 2006 and 2017. Future research could benefit from a broader literature base (i.e., also including general management). The limitations of the method are also the strengths, since they allow for identification of both explicit and implicit descriptions. For example, many times the role of the project manager was implied rather than explicitly described, which would have been difficult to find in a computer-based search only. Due to the interpretive nature of the literature overview, no definite conclusions could be made regarding expectations of project manager behavior regarding contributions to organizational improvement initiatives. The literature overview is not exhaustive of all available relevant literature, which means there are potentially additional findings to be made to further add nuance to the findings in this article.

For practitioners, this article emphasizes the existence of one or more additional roles ascribed to the project manager and that any additional roles need to be formalized if those roles are to be realized. For researchers, the research adds to the understanding of expectations of the project manager role. Further research considering expectations of project managers could provide increased understanding of the difficulties regarding improvement work in PBOs. Additional insights not included, due to delimitations, suggest that the role of improvement agent could potentially differ, depending on the type of PBO (subsidiary or stand-alone). Also, discussing project performance implies the potential to improve, and the findings here suggest a need for further insight into the mechanisms of improvement in multiproject contexts.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The research for this article has been funded by the Hjalmar Lundbohm Research Center.

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