

# Let's NOT Be On the Same Page: Project Managers Need To Harness Various Views

06 August 2021



**Michael Broadbent, Group Executive**, Qscan Group and Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business.

**Mohsen Varsei, Senior Lecturer**, Australian Institute of Business.

Groupthink has long been recognised as an impediment to organisational success. This article discusses ways of widening creative inputs into the decision-making process.

Perhaps it's a trait of the human condition that people like working with others who are like themselves, who are on the same page (often *my* page) in family, organisation, government, academia, industry, or any other system. It might be rooted in our 12,000 year history of agricultural revolution and tribal warfare that we, [Homo sapiens](#), love to be surrounded by those who think just like us.

However, could a [different culture](#) and broader range of views have helped us avoid the [2008 Global Financial Crisis](#) (GFC) which cost the world economy trillions? Has the different and diverse approach of football manager [Gareth Southgate](#) resulted in the England team's overall success in Euro 2020, reaching its first major final [since 1966](#)?

The answer might be *yes*, as [research](#) and [experience](#) suggest a lack of both *cognitive* and *demographic* diversity within teams renders them collectively blind to problems and possible creative solutions. In the lead up to the 2008 financial crisis, [critical discussion of significant market failure](#) or dissent to the prevailing views was not tolerated in the realms of academia and government policymaking, indeed enabling dangerous "[groupthink](#)" to emerge which ultimately caused carnage in people's lives.

[Groupthink](#) happens when we avoid the expression of doubts and disagreement upon a consensus view, or when we try to rationalise the poor decision-making and judgment of our social or ideological community. Cognitive and demographic diversity can help us improve problem-solving and avoid groupthink in project management, particularly as project managers often face complex, [wicked problems](#) throughout the project lifecycle, irrespective of whether the complexity they face is rooted in [technical, directional, temporal or structural](#) domains.

Drawing from [complexity theory](#) and applied systems thinking, [Michael Jackson's](#) book (*Systems Thinking: Creative Holism for Managers*) offers project managers a suite of soft system approaches and tools designed to harness the power of diverse views and perspectives among team members and stakeholders, while acknowledging the inherent complexity emanating from such social systems.

One such approach is [Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing \(SAST\)](#), which is designed to achieve greater mutual understanding and the negotiation of shared meaning. SAST features a number of principles that are key to avoid groupthink in project management: genuine involvement of opposing views (adversarial); inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders (participative); reconciliation of diverse views to a higher level allowing management action to be pursued (integrative); and, ensuring that project managers who are exposed to a wider range of views will have a deeper, diverse understanding of the issues or problems to be solved. Here, project managers need to acknowledge [various layers of diversity](#), from race, ethnic background, gender and age group to personality, beliefs, worldviews, mental models, values and attitudes.

SAST offers the opportunity to embrace diversity, promoting the notion that soft system approaches can help project managers improve project outcomes beyond [traditional](#) project management approaches. While it sounds complex, the application of SAST can be simple yet powerful. In this article we present the following [adapted](#) four SAST steps in a framework, with the hope that project managers find it useful in problem definition, project initiation and stakeholder analysis, but also as an iterative framework that can be used throughout the project lifecycle to support issue resolution:

### 1. Form the Group

Project managers **identify, engage and empower a cognitive and demographic diverse set of stakeholders** from different levels and parts of the organisation as well as its suppliers and wider community regarding "the problem to be solved", with the view of involving a significant proportion of the diversity of perspective and knowledge that exists within the organisation and stakeholders.

### 2. Surface assumptions & dialectic debate

Project managers engage with a diverse group of stakeholders in a [psychological safe environment](#) to enable a wide range of perspectives regarding the "the problem to be solved" to be surfaced and considered, with [dialectic debate from various \(including opposing\) viewpoints](#).

### 3. Synthesize views

Project managers **facilitate agreement upon a compromise list of assumptions and views** that can be used to inform higher-level solutions and management action for the "the problem to be solved", supporting the clarity of project objectives and outcomes.

### 4. Management action

Project manager use the **insights surfaced to gain a deeper understanding** of the "the problem to be solved", organisational difficulties and diversity, with a view to improving the proposed solution and supporting the improved definition or interpretation of project objectives and outcomes.

Diversity of thoughts and perspectives among teams and stakeholders assists project managers to overcome complex "wicked problems" that increasingly populate our world. Soft systems approaches such as SAST can provide project managers the opportunity for their projects to not only cope with complexity and disorder, but to indeed thrive from it and become [antifragile](#).

Finally, we suggest managers might consider starting by taking a photograph of their team, business unit or organisation (to see some gaps in big picture), and then go deeper with tools like SAST to harness both demographic and cognitive diversity.



## Michael Broadbent

Group Executive, Qscan Group and Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business.

Michael is an experienced practitioner with “skin in the game”, and an academic with a passion for learning. His professional background in the health & utilities sectors strongly influences his research interest in service based supply chains and strategic partnerships facing disruption, turbulence, and volatility.



## Dr. Mohsen Varsei

Discipline Leader, Australian Institute of Business

Mohsen passionately facilitates strategic supply chain and operations management MBA subjects at AIB where he and students enjoy learning together.