

## Hidden goals in projects: A qualitative exploratory study of their occurrence and causes

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### Abstract

While project management literature acknowledges the significance of goals for overall project success and strongly recommends that projects aim for having clear goals, project management literature also contains accounts of goals, which are hidden, tacit or covert – resulting in an apparent contradiction. In order to explore the topic of hidden goals, this study summarizes the view that the project management literature has on hidden goals and offers empirical accounts from experienced project professionals. The study finds that experienced project managers are familiar with the phenomenon of hidden goals. A typology based on the causes leading to a goal remaining hidden is proposed: goal-holders may be unaware that their need constitutes a goal; goal-holders may be unable to articulate or to communicate their goal; goals may also become lost; and goal-holders might decide not to state their goal overtly, whether due to ulterior motives or to accommodate others' interests. Alternatively goal-holders may also consider non-disclosure an overriding necessity. In addition, the study offers practitioners help in understanding the phenomenon of hidden goals and presents scholars with avenues for detailed study.

*Keywords:* Project management; Hidden goals; Communication difficulty; Cognitive limitations; Negotiation tactics; Political behaviour

## 1. Introduction

Project management scholars have largely agreed that projects should have clear goals (e.g. Kerzner, 2009:296), and goal clarity has regularly been identified as an important project success factor (e.g. Schultz, Slevin & Pinto, 1987; Belassi & Tukel, 1996). Goals are made clear either by making them specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and tangible (e.g. Kerzner, 2009:296) or through active communication (e.g. Skulmoski & Hartman, 2010).

In contrast, some authors point to the existence of goals, which are “hidden” (Frame, 1995, p. 49), “tacit” (Kotsalo-Mustonen, 1996, p. 49–50; Saravirta, 2001, p. 54–55) or “covert” (Turner, 1993, p. 55–56). The phenomenon of hidden, tacit or covert goals (collectively referred to as hidden goals) is interesting, considering the understandable demand for goal clarity, and as hidden goals are neither measurable nor communicated. This apparent non-congruence warrants investigation.

This study therefore aims to explore hidden goals and attempts to build a descriptive framework for identifying hidden goals and their causes. Firstly, this study presents the existing literature’s view of hidden goals. Secondly, the gathering of empirical data is described. Thirdly, the study presents professional project managers’ views on, as well as their understanding of the causes of hidden goals, while also discussing these findings and offering a descriptive framework for different types of hidden goals. Finally, the findings are summarized, and the significance of hidden goals in projects is discussed.

To circumvent the at times confusing use of terms such as goal, objective, and purpose, this paper aligns specific terms to types of goal-holder: A primary party’s (contractually bound organizations) goal is an *objective*; a player’s or party’s goal is an *ambition*; if the project

itself has been set a goal to be achieved, it is a *requirement*. Similarly, “hidden goals” is here used as a non-discriminating term for covert/tacit/hidden objectives/ambitions.

## 2. Hidden goals in project management literature

This chapter reviews occurrences of hidden, tacit or covert objectives and ambitions in project management literature. Besides those occurrences encountered through previous project management research, databases were queried for articles related to project management, which detail or describe hidden goals, doing a full-text search covering the central databases of scholarly publishing (ABI/Inform, Business Source Complete, DOAJ – Directory of Open Access Journals, JSTOR – Business Collection, SAGE Journals Online, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, and Scopus). Subsequently, the resulting list of hits were analyzed for relevance, resulting in a small number of directly relevant articles. Sources offering general explanations for hidden goals will be presented first, where after sources offering anecdotal evidence will be summarized.

### 2.1 Explanations for hidden goals

Saravirta notes, that Nonaka’s and Takeuchi’s delineation between explicit and tacit knowledge can be applied to project goals, resulting in a three-tier model: tacit goals (goals which cannot be articulated), implicit goals (goals which could be, but have not been articulated) and explicit goals (goals which have been articulated). (2001, p. 54–55)

Kotsalo-Mustonen states, that individuals and organizations can have both tacit and explicit goals. While explicit objectives are often derived from organizations’ strategies, tacit objectives originate in organizational culture and tradition. Tacit ambitions usually serve private goals and may thus complement or conflict with explicit goals. (1996, p. 49–50)

Turner notes, that parties and players partaking in projects have differing ambitions, some of which might be covert. Such hidden agendas might support overt objectives, but often do not. As causes for covert ambitions, Turner identifies selfish reasons such as actors wishing to heighten their influence or improve their position, while also noting that covert ambitions may be related to maintaining the status quo or generally resisting change. (1993, p. 55–56)

## ***2.2 Other occurrences of hidden goals***

Besides these four cases linking hidden goals to a general explanation for their occurrence, a number of sources described hidden goals, either without offering any causes or offering only very specific explanations: Mirvis and Lawler report on a project, which's varying adoption was linked to whether the system's objective was in line with users' covert goals (1983).

Frame states that individuals may have hidden goals, and notes that goal-holders may be more affected by their hidden goals than by work-related goals (1995, p. 49). Anumba, Siemieniuch and Sinclair discuss hidden objectives, noting that significant hidden goals and insufficiently shared goals lead to a deterioration of trust (2000). Ferneley and Bell detail a project, in which central actors felt the need to hide some of their goals in order to get top management to approval (2006). Kawalek and Hart note, that individuals' decision to partake in a project may be based on the overt objective or the individual's hidden ambition, and that while these may support each other they may also undermine each other (2007). von Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis & Veenswijk report on a joint venture project, where the project alliance leadership team had the "[...]covert goal to promote public–private partner project-based alliancing as the preferred method for realising complex infrastructural projects." (2008, p. 596). Saliou and Ribaud describe a case where a supplier had the hidden objective of utilizing the project for strategy development and knowledge acquisition (2010, p. 153). Similarly Leung, Liang,

Priem and Shaffer detail an international joint venture, in which some participating organizations had the hidden goal of acquiring technology (2013).

### **2.3 Reflections on literature review**

The accounts and explanations regarding hidden goals in project management literature indicate, that while the phenomenon is not well known, it is not spurious. Furthermore, these findings allow the creation of a tentative classification: Firstly, goals may *remain hidden*, meaning that goal-holders do not convey their objectives or ambitions because of difficulties in cognitive processes or in communication. Secondly, goals can be *wilfully hidden*, implying that goal-holders make a conscious decision to not reveal a goal. These will, in line with Saravirta's terminology, be referred to as *tacit* and *implicit* goals respectively.

In summary, a more detailed study is evidently warranted. Also, as there seems to be no agreement on a definition of hidden goals, this paper adopts the definition "An objective or an ambition is a hidden goal if the relevant counterparts are not aware of the objective or ambition", in order to not rule out anything potentially relevant.

## **3 Methods**

This section will detail the methods of the study in a very concise form. The purpose of the empirical study was to a) put forward hypothesis' regarding causes of why the goals are hidden and; b) be able to present an empirically-based typology of hidden goals. Therefore the empirical study serves two purposes: it tries to clarify the phenomenon (inductive) based on empirical data, while also trying to find explanations for phenomena (abductive) (See Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). As goals need to be interpreted by human actors (Simon, 1964), the reality of goals is subjective and meaning emerges through human interpretation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

As hidden goals cannot be found in project documents, the target of this study is the experiences of project professionals. Therefore, a broad-spectrum study of professionals was carried out, asking them to, describe incidences of hidden goals in projects. Interviewees were also offered the opportunity to speculate on the causes leading to that goals have been or have remained hidden. As the study was exploratory, I set out to hold a series of loosely guided deep interviews – an approach widely utilized (Saunders et al., 2009) and deemed suitable in exploratory studies (Robson, 2002). The interview set-up was field-tested, in order to ensure feasibility.

A randomized stratified (according to industry) sample of the Project Management Association Finland's 196 partner organizations was selected, in order to aim for broad coverage. The resulting empirical material encompasses 13 interviews (average duration 94 minutes) with project management professionals, who represent a broad spectrum of positions, industries, levels of experience and genders, as seen in Table 3.1. In subsequent sections, the interviews are cited as numbers from 1 to 13.

<b>Gender</b>	<b>experience (years)</b>	<b>Primary sector</b>	<b>Primary industry</b>	<b>Organisational seniority during PM career</b>
Male	25	Private	IT	Middle management, specialist
Male	11	Private	Expert services	Management, middle management
Male	7	Private	R & D	Middle management
Male	25	Private	Construction	Management, middle management
Male	30	Private	Construction	Management, middle management
Female	5	Private	Expert services	Middle management, specialist
Male	24	Private	IT	Management
Female	15	Private	IT	Middle management, specialist
Female	14	Public	Expert services	Middle management, specialist
Male	14	Private	R & D	Middle management
Male	17	Public	IT	Middle management, specialist
Male	3	Private	IT	Specialist
Male	10	Private	IT	Specialist

**Table 3.1: Demographic summary of interviewees**

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

The interviews clearly show, that hidden goals are something experienced project managers have personal experience of. After rigorous and repeated analysis of the interviews, the causes

became most sensibly portrayed as a decision tree (see Figure 4.1) with initial decisions opening up subsequent decision points. The decision tree also shows, that there are several ways in which goals can remain hidden, whereas there is only one path to making a goal both overt and known (thus “shared”). The subsequent chapters will detail the different types of causes, while also offering a specific discussion on each type of hidden goal.

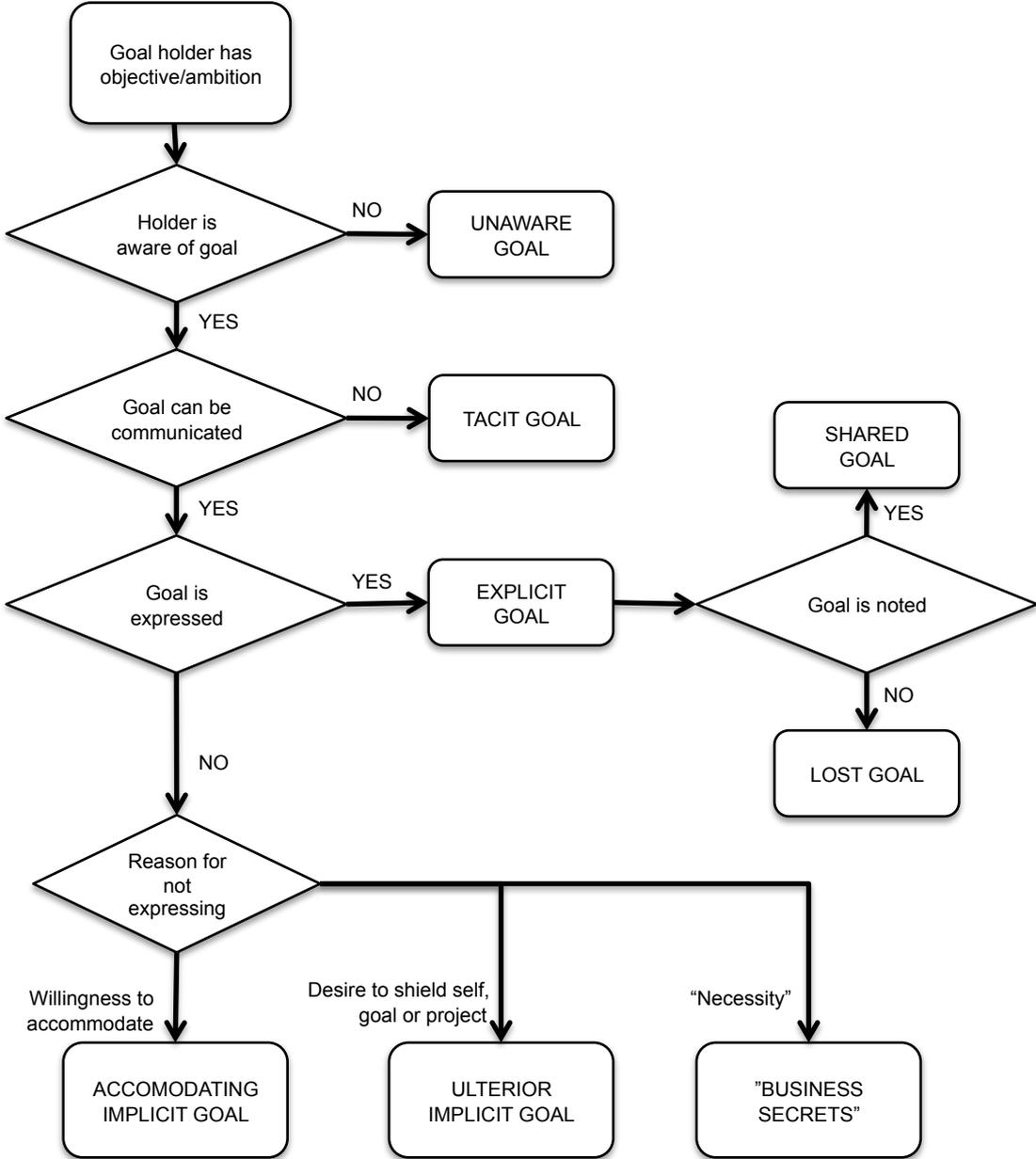


Figure 4.1: Decision tree of goal visibility

#### **4.1 Awareness of goal (unaware goals)**

A number of interviewees pointed out, that the first hurdle might be, that goal holders omit mentioning a goal as they, based on their industry's thinking, feel it too self-evident (4, 7, 12, 13), in short that they are not aware of it needing to be a goal. Interviewees emphasized, that this becomes problematic for projects when parties' thinking is guided by different assumptions, thus not sharing the same conceptions of what is self-evident.

#### **4.2 Ability to communicate goal (tacit goals)**

Several interviewees noted, that inabilities in articulating and communicating goals regularly cause hidden goals (1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 12, 13). While some noted that a goal holder might not be able "[...] to dress in words something which instinctively is quite clear to him" (12), others saw the problem as mainly related to communication, especially when goals and limitations are complexly interrelated (3, 12, 13), or if parties' expertises or viewpoints are so at odds that they can not understand each other (8, 9, 12). Interviewees also pointed out, that competitive tendering and transitional projects are less conducive to communication (2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13), and that stakeholders are unable to communicate their ambitions, if they do not have access to project decision-makers (5);

Firstly, the notion of project set-ups leading to restricted communication is interesting, especially considering the widespread use of regimented and competitive procurement. However, the bulk of the interviewees' experiences can be understood as related to the processes of externalization, combination and internalization: the expressing of tacit knowledge in a transferable form; combing different bits of explicit knowledge into a coherent whole; and making explicit knowledge personal and instinctive (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 8; 62–70). While the mere externalizing may be insurmountable, several interviewees noted, that the problem is exacerbated by complexity and diversity of

information. According to the interviewees, communication may be troubled at several levels: between parties; between professional groups; and between different organizational strata.

#### **4.3 Willingness to communicate goal (implicit goals)**

The study showed that there are several types of causes leading to a decision to keep a goal hidden. Firstly, several interviewees generalized that project settings demand individuals to be more flexible and accommodating than continuous settings (4, 5, 6, 11). While some noted that people are more willing to put up with bad treatment in unique ventures (10, 13), others noted that projects frown upon conflicts (3, 7, 9), that optimism is a socially acceptable fallacy (9), and that projects are regularly reframed in order to keep them off management's radar (12). I refer to these rationales collectively as *accommodating implicit goals*.

Secondly, the interviews were replete with anecdotes of ulterior motives leading to the wilful hiding of goals (*ulterior implicit goals*). A majority of interviewees saw ulterior implicit goals to result from organizational politics and gamesmanship (1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13): actors safeguarding a realm against threatening projects (1, 2, 7); actors using projects as a means for enhancing their influence (1, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13); even thoroughly politicised organizations in which "[...] your best bet of achieving an ambition is to never openly state it." (2). A number of interviewees noted that, as hidden goals cannot impact a project's requirements, ulterior implicit goals necessitate overt "covering goals" (1, 2, 13). Some also noted, that disclosure of the rationale may be more detrimental than disclosing a goal, thus leading to the use of false arguments (9, 12, 13). Ulterior implicit goals are not solely used by actors who lack formal power, as interviewees mentioned cases where management was hiding goals, in order to mislead the project teams (3, 6, 7).

Finally, some interviewees raised cases, in which top management's wilful hiding of objectives from the team or other organizations may be "necessary", even obligatory, such as related to intellectual property, business plans, economic reporting rules etc. (3, 6, 9, 11, 13). These rationales I refer to as "*business secrets*".

To understand the existence and logic behind implicit goals, it is necessary to not view organizations as unitary actors having clearly defined, universally shared goals. Instead, organizations need to be viewed either as coalitions made up of individuals and sub-coalitions, which in turn do have goals (Cyert & March, 1963, p. 26–28) and/or nodes in a web of stakeholder relationships (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 66–69). Furthermore, the goals of these various stakeholders, sub-coalitions, and individuals can be assumed to exist in a state of non-congruence, even conflict (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 28–29; van Lamsweerde, Darimont & Letier, 1998). Whether the situation is conceptualized using theories of organizational politics (see e.g. March & Simon, 1958, p. 129–130), intergroup disagreement (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964), social power (French & Raven, 1959) or negotiation (see e.g. Meredith & Mantel, 2010, p. 161–165), the withholding of potentially valuable information from counterparts is seen as a central tactic (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 119–121; Lewicki, Barry & Saunders, 2010, p. 33).

#### **4.4 Ability to understand goal (lost goals)**

Finally, some interviewees pointed out that goals may be "lost", meaning that even though goals are expressed, they are not taken note of (1, 2, 4, 8, 10, 12, 13), either as details are lost as communication passes through intermediaries (3, 4, 10) or because a strong focus on requirements leads to disregarding communicated objectives (1, 2, 4, 8). Interestingly, a number of interviewees also noted, that information overload may constitute a problem (1, 13). The interviewees did not agree on whether written communication is beneficial in this

regard, with some blaming unstructured oral communication (2, 10), while others found written communication to lead to fire-and-forget –syndrome (13). One interviewee also noted that contractors might wish particularly difficult objectives to “get lost” (12). These accounts can be analyzed and understood using mostly the same theories as tacit goals.

## 5. Conclusions

It is safe to say that projects fail uncomfortably often. One of the many possible types of project failure is that the result of the project, while being in line with what the project was required to achieve, does not meet the objectives of the primary parties (e.g. Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Packendorff, 1995). Whereas it might occur that defined requirements are not fully congruent with overt objectives it might also be that the real objectives would necessitate a different set of requirements than the mere overt objectives.

While hidden objectives may contribute directly to requirements not being congruent with real objectives, hidden ambitions may also produce detrimental effects. Firstly, the actor holding an accommodating implicit ambition may have a detached or negative view of the project and its result (1, 3, 13). Secondly, holders of implicit hidden ambitions, which are contrary to the overt goals, have a lessened motivation to see the project through to its result. (1, 2, 12). Thirdly, actors whose ulterior implicit ambition has been frustrated may resort to drastic measures (1, 11, 13). Finally, hidden goals could have been able to offer valuable input for the project.

Practitioners should therefore consider goals remaining hidden as significant for overall project success on several levels. Table 5.1 summarizes the study’s findings on the causes leading to goals remaining hidden. While the table clearly shows that some causes are outside of project managers’ influence, it also highlights that a significant share of hidden goals

remain hidden accidentally, and that the most frequent causes are related to communication, especially between people of different organizations, and professions. Sadly, a more detailed inspection of remedies to hidden goals remains outside of the scope of this study.

HIDDEN GOAL TYPE	IDENTIFIED CAUSES
Unaware goal	Inability to empathize with counterpart; communication structured as if counterpart was as you are
Tacit goal	Problems related to externalization, internalization, communication medium, or structure of communication; inability to gain access
Accommodating implicit goal	Conflict avoidance behaviour; perception of needing to unify in the face of opposition.
Ulterior Implicit goal	Political behaviour; ulterior motives; power-plays; negotiation tactics
"Business secrets"	"Need-to-know", privileged information; competition-related issues;
Lost goal	Conflict between communicated objectives and requirements; loss of detail; structure of communication; political activity; information overload

**Table 5.1: Summary of causes to goals remaining hidden.**

To the best of the author's knowledge this is the first study, which focuses on hidden goals in projects. This paper's main contribution is in that it, as an exploratory study, puts forth a typology of a largely ignored phenomenon. Even though the research presented here is constrained by being based on recollections of a limited number of individuals, it hopefully holds value for project management scholars and practitioners.

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