Project-Based Organizing: The Unexpected Trajectory of the Project to the Crisis

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Abstract
Being in the field when a crisis occurs cannot be planned. According to the literature, it is in those moments that the structure becomes more evident [18]. This case study provides an opportunity for such research; its particularity being that the crisis state develops following a sudden awareness about the project critical situation. This awareness is caused by the unexpected arrival of a new executive, forcing a rapid change in the analytical framework. This change, combined with radical actions taken by that individual, provokes swift changes in discourses followed by the outbreak of a crisis. Our results show how the development of unmanaged problems within the project, and the permanent organization, may gradually lead the project trajectory into a negative spin, until a crisis triggers. Furthermore, our reuse of some notions coming from the crisis management literature enables us to deepen our understanding of crises in projects.

1. Introduction
The outbreak of a crisis is not a phenomenon that you can plan to observe in the field. Indeed, studies on crises are usually based on historical data [3] due to the intrinsic difficulty related to this object of study. When a rare opportunity like this occurs, it should be taken. This paper is based on such a serendipitous opportunity [20] that occurred while studying on multidisciplinary collaboration in a large IT project. During the fieldwork period, the first author happened to witness the outbreak of a crisis; the shift in the project trajectory could be observed as well as changes in the associated discourses. Crises are perceived as dynamic and complex processes, out of control, that threaten the survival of organizations and transforms them [4]. They can be considered as an extreme state of failure. In the crisis management literature, it is suggested that each research domain could benefit from studies on crisis [23]; during crises, organizational structures would be more easily observed [18]. However, few studies have focused on the crisis phenomenon in project management research, particularly for IS projects [1]. This study is aimed to contribute to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon in projects, and therefore, our understanding of projects. Our focus is on one central question: How did this crisis develop? For this purpose, we borrow notions like organizational imperfections and managerial ignorance [19] from the crisis management literature. These are introduced in the overview of the literature about the organizational crisis in the theoretical background section, which also includes an overview of the literature on project crisis. Then follows the research design, the case study presentation, the analysis and the conclusion.

2. Theoretical background
2.1. The organizational crisis
The notion of crisis does not have a consensual definition in the field of crisis management [4]; there are several types of crises, and their causes are multiple and varied. Crises can be caused by a combination of organizational and individual faults, or changes, in the organization’s environment [7]. Furthermore, crises can be seen as a cognitive phenomenon where causation, as well as the consequences, can be interpreted differently by various actors [4]. However, crises are recognized to share the following common characteristics: 1) they are highly ambiguous situations where causes and effects are unknown; 2) they have a low probability of occurring while posing a major threat to an organization's survival; 3) they offer little time to respond; 4) sometimes, they are surprises for organizational members; and 5) they present a dilemma
in need of a decision or judgment without the ability to anticipate with certainty the consequences [17].

Crisis can be conceptualized either as events or as processes; both are considered complementary for crisis's analysis [19]. The event approach focuses upon the nature and consequences of the crisis [4], while the process approach focuses on the elements referring to the dynamics of the crisis [23]; its basic premise is that crises develop in phases, which are usually distinguished according to the following stages: warning signals (incubation phase), triggering event (acute phase), amplification (crisis and escalation phase) and resolution. Under this approach, crises are resulting from a long period of incubation that bluntly occurs through the influence of a triggering event [19]. Consequently, crises can reveal the properties and hidden factors that the organization was not aware before their occurrence [19]. Roux-Dufort [19] proposes a crisis development model using the process approach. This model is based upon the tenet that crises would result from a combination of two parallels and cumulative processes, with a triggering event. These processes are: 1) organizational imperfections' accumulation process, which creates an environment conductive to the occurrence of a crisis; and 2) managerial ignorance (or unconsciousness) development process, which keeps the managers blind to the presence of these vulnerabilities. Therefore, organizational imperfections could continue to accumulate because they are not raised or considered by managers. The managerial ignorance is the difference between the world as it is and the lens through which the manager sees it [19]; managers would structure their decision situations so that they meet their view of the world. Their choice being always exercised in accordance with a simplified model that is limited and approximated to the actual situation. Roux-Dufort’s [19] model is in four phases: 1) anomalies unnoticed by managers: weak signals that remain unnoticed because of current beliefs; 2) vulnerabilities and their normalization by managers: medium and strong signals, which are ambiguous. However, they may be noticed by some parts of the organization; 3) disruptions and their denial by managers: the catalyst, the beginning of the crisis, where a triggering event sets on the ultimate failure. Contrary to the other phases, this one takes place during a short and tense period; 4) crisis and escalation: the crisis triggers internal and external vulnerabilities, and decision makers realize they can no longer manage the organization as before. Their management is also put under question.

Through this model, Roux-Dufort [19] suggests that the distinction between external and internal organizational crises does not hold; the crisis would be more the result of how managers experience and cope with a triggering event than of the event itself. We are referring to this model in our analysis of the project crisis, which is an internal crisis. However, before introducing further our study, we complete this theoretical section with an overview of the literature about projects and crises.

2.2. The project and the crisis

A project is conceptualized as a temporary organization [8], due to its end date. It can exist within a permanent organization, or standalone. In this paper, we are focusing on projects within permanent organizations (also called parent organizations). The crisis phenomenon can be experienced for temporary organizations [16], as for permanent organizations. In this study, we are focusing on the crisis phenomenon in projects. As such, a crisis is a state of extreme failure in a project; each project follows its own trajectory throughout its lifetime, and at any given time, the project is perceived as being on a successful or failed (or also crisis) path, which refers to its potential for achieving its ‘raison d’être’. Thus, the project trajectory may vary in time [25] and even be chaotic, especially when a crisis is encountered. A project crisis does not necessarily result in a project failure. The crisis implies that the project encounters an extreme state of failure at one point, which will be managed successfully or not, orienting the project into a success or failure path. In case of failure in its management, the crisis can eventually result in the premature end of life of the temporary organization. In some major cases, it may have a significant impact upon the health of its parent organization and weaken it.

In the project management and IS literature, project success and failure have been and are still the subject of an ongoing conversation [13][22]. Project success and failure factors are popular topics [13], and other notions are also encountered, like: errors' normalization [24], projects escalation [23], warning signs [12], and especially unexpected events [2]. In this literature, few studies have focused on the crisis phenomenon in project management, particularly in IS [1]. In fact, the notion of unexpected event, which is a more neutral and global concept that is inspired by risk management, is often used: an unexpected event may have been predicted (or not), but it is not expected to happen. When happening, it can have a considerable impact on the project [2]. This type of event can be considered as a risk with low probability, but a high impact, which creates an imbalance in the project. Even when already identified as a risk, this type of event is rarely addressed by the risk management process, which focuses primarily on more probable
risks that have an impact on the project. However, the successful responses to this type of event are suggested to be built upon three pillars: responsive and functioning structure, good interpersonal relationship and competent people [2]. Therefore, in case of an unsuccessful response to this type of event, the project can be negatively impacted, and a crisis can be triggered.

Interestingly, the uncertain nature of temporary organizations would make them prone to the occurrence of unexpected events [2]; indeed, projects are facing a continuum of unexpected changes ranging from simple variations (or random uncertainty) to chaos (or epistemic uncertainty) [16]. Furthermore, whenever crises, accidents or major faults occur, one or more interstices would often be at the heart of the dysfunction: interstices are small spaces (or gaps) between parts of an organization that are in contact, and they would tend to multiply these days [11]. Temporary organizations should be a fertile ground for the creation of interstices, as they usually involve several disciplines, therefore, organizations parts. In addition, the popularity of projects could contribute to the observed increase of interstices, making them potentially conducive to the occurrence of disorders, in turn leading to crises.

In this section, we have presented the main theoretical notions mobilized by our study. The failure (or success) of projects is still an important issue [13][22]. We want to contribute to deepen the understanding of the challenges encountered in projects through the study of the project crisis phenomenon, since during a crisis, structure would be more easily observed [18]. Furthermore, through this study, we also want to contribute to fulfill the request of Söderlund [22] about searching for a more fundamental understanding of projects, such as deepen the understanding of their functioning.

3. Research Design

Our research approach is a case study with flexible design, which uses narrative strategy, temporal decomposition, and visual mapping. Its main unit of analysis is the project. It also uses two secondary units of analysis: the groups of professionals and the formal project status reports. It is important to note that originally, multidisciplinary collaboration was our main focus for this field study. However, non-collaboration was initially observed, which required us to quickly broaden our study to project governance [21], while fortuitously [20], the outbreak of a crisis was occurring.

Theory-based sampling method was used for the project, since the sample becomes, by definition and selection, representative of the phenomenon of interest [15]. The selection criteria we applied were: an IT business project that included software development, with a formal coordination committee composed of business and technical representatives, and with a steering committee. This type of project usually involves two major types of participants, those responsible for business changes and those in command of technological changes. They must coordinate their activities through various governance mechanisms. This coordination involves stakeholders from the permanent and temporary organizations in many disciplines such as project managers, technical leads, domain experts, business analysts, change experts, middle-managers, etc.

Our empirical exploratory study was carried out in 2012, in a private telecommunication company, which is a major player in its sector in Canada. The project TOBO was among the top three high priority projects. It was executed in matrix mode and involved around 150 people at the time of the study. These people were from three major sectors of the parent organization, one IT and two business sectors (sectors A and B), distributed overall in more than 20 units. The first author was present in the field to observe meetings and conduct interviews during 13 days over a potential of 25 working days, and for periods varying between one to six hours (average 3 hours). In 2013, additional interviews were conducted in order to gather supplementary data on the project history and its outcome. The research data sources were semi-structured interviews, meetings’ observations, documentation on the project and the organization, logbooks as well as notes and memos. The method for these interviews and observations was Typical case sampling, in order to select participants and project coordination meetings representing different groups and point of views. Five coordination meetings were observed, and twelve participants were interviewed. We also had access to the project records, which were quite voluminous since the project had started two years before. From these records, the documentation related to project statuses was extracted (more than one hundred formal documents).

For the analysis strategy, the main approach resulted in the use of traditional scientific research criteria, as we seek to describe and explain phenomena as accurately and completely as possible, so that their descriptions and explanations correspond, as closely as possible, to the way the world exists and works [15]. Validity criteria of this study are mainly provided by data triangulation and by conducting semi-structured interviews, with open questions, using the same
detailed interview guide, providing uniformity in the information gathered and questions. Transcripts were produced and sent to participants to ensure their validity. The interpretations made during analysis were validated with some participants in order to prevent potential biases and distortions. In addition, study results were validated with a subset of participants. Since it is a simple case study, it may be pointed out that the main potential limitation of such studies lies in their transferability [27]. However, a single case study is appropriate when it represents a revelatory case [27], which is the case for the project crisis that is not a phenomenon easily accessible from a research standpoint [14].

4. Case Study presentation

First, the organizational context of TOBO project creation and the project history are presented, followed by two significant periods in the project: the stabilization period and the crisis outbreak.

4.1. Organizational context of project creation

The parent organization is in the competitive and dynamic telecommunication sector. For the past ten years, it has experienced a strong growth and quickly transformed into a large company. However, its internal processes have not all evolved at the same pace, forcing this organization to make adjustments according to its most urgent needs. Organizational changes are thus frequent.

Originally, the reasoning behind TOBO project was the replacement of an obsolete management package and its technological infrastructure. This project was deferred several times in past years. It was its transformation into a strategic business project, which allowed its approval. For this purpose, strategic and technical needs were combined into an integrated business strategy: The **identification of project benefits and their judicious use allows transforming this "mandatory IT expense" in a "strategic technological investment."** The referred strategy was to provide a flexible IT system that could meet the evolving needs of the business in order to support their dynamic context, which was mainly influenced by the limited lifetimes of their products, combined with a need to rapid time to market them, and effective internal processes. The old package was not fulfilling these needs, and internal processes were tedious and slow, having many manual operations.

Prior to TOBO, a feasibility study resulted in the following findings: 1) the old package offered a thin coverage of inventoried needs; 2) the proposed solution was an in-house IT system, allowing reuse of several features available through integration to existing IT systems; many were also in-house. Thus, the study was reporting: **the old package covers 29% of inventoried needs... TOBO project satisfies 68% of these needs... The needs that are covered in addition (compared to the 29% covered by the old package), have not been selected. They are part of current systems (i.e.: reuse available through integration).** The purchase of a commercial management package had been compared to this solution, but since they both showed similar estimated investment costs, the issue of flexibility was decisive in the choice of the in-house solution.

The official goal of TOBO project was to: **implement the chosen solution** while also stating that it was the first step in the promulgated vision implementation. However, the project scope was somewhat ambiguous: The new solution must **eventually allow the implementation of all features and functions identified in the inventory of needs, even if they are not initially delivered. Minimally, functions, features, products and customers’ data currently provided in the old package should be re-conducted in the new system for this project.** Nevertheless, it was uniformly understood that whatever its effective scope, TOBO would result in significant changes to business processes; these included responsibilities' transfers between both participating sectors A and B.

TOBO governance structure was divided into three levels: 1) The strategic committee, primarily composed of top managers, was in command of budget and schedule; 2) The steering committee, mostly composed of middle-managers, was responsible for the scope and monthly monitoring; 3) The core team, mainly composed of lower level middle-managers, was responsible for ensuring daily multidisciplinary project coordination. The core team was divided into two coordinating committees: Business and IT. The project manager had to bridge the gap between these committees. Two domain experts (one for each sector) were assigned to the project as pilots, and they were responsible for all project deliverables' approval. TOBO required the participation of several IT (14) and Business (4) teams, which brought a significant need for coordination.

4.2. Project History

Initially, the project was planned to last 1.5 years. However, it was soon found to be more complex than expected due to the extent of knowledge required to replace the old package and carry out the integration with existing systems, including the coordination of several teams. Within IT, these teams mainly represented the various IT systems to integrate: each
team was focused on its own part, thus having limited knowledge, mostly technical. Consequently, their business process knowledge and global understanding were limited. In addition, the solution architect left gradually the project after the feasibility study, as it was the norm. However, TOBO was a much larger and complex project than usual and the project manager, Ted, had to act as the main coordination bridge. For the coordination of business process knowledge, he was helped by the two pilots. Both were also supporting the IT teams in the understanding of business processes and requirements. They were assigned full-time to the project, which was new to the organization. The inter-teams tasks’ coordination was mainly performed by Ted, but for the coordination of intra-team and of technical knowledge, he relied mostly on the team managers, which were lower level middle-managers.

During the first months of the project, six key issues came out: 1) Ambiguous project scope: every management levels had their own understandings and expectations; 2) Solution design limitations: these would impact the targeted improvement of many business processes; 3) Exaggerations in current IT systems features: the inventory of IT systems’ features, performed during the feasibility study, was listing some incomplete or non-existent features; 4) Major oversight in project scope: the data migration activities were forgotten; 5) Underestimations of project work: optimistic estimates were provided, which was the usual practice for obtaining project approval; 6) Underestimation of project complexity: effort and knowledge required to coordinate IT and business teams activities, including systems integration, were much more significant and complex than expected.

Due to all these issues, top managers gave significant scope restriction directives, which resulted in limiting business process improvements. These limitations were made visible by Ted through formal change requests for additional budget, in order to enlarge the scope. These requests were also highlighted during project committee meetings and in progress status reports. In parallel, the pilots had a great influence in the solution building due to their domain knowledge and to their approval role. This gave them opportunities to get bonus features related to process improvement, whenever possible. Thus, the scope restriction directives were not strictly followed during project execution.

Additionally, the project multidisciplinary coordination proved to be ineffective: resources’ availability issues were encountered chronically. The project was executed in a weak matrix mode within which participants’ roles and objectives in the permanent organization, seemed to take precedence over the project’s ones. In addition, some IT teams, which were already having a reputation of problematic deliveries, turned out to be the most difficult to mobilize throughout the project. One of these teams had a critical system to deliver. Furthermore, the pilots began to be late in deliverables’ approvals, while increasingly challenging the relevance of having to approve these, arguing having not the required technical knowledge for their full understanding. Moreover, due to these issues, the schedule became increasingly tighter: many activities started before the approval of their associated deliverables, to prevent additional delays. Thus, the project became increasingly risky.

In parallel, Ted progressively understood that some changes had to be initiated within the permanent organization: the current quality processes were having major flaws and had to be more robust, due to TOBO complexity. Ted managed to convince the top management of this requirement, and TOBO became the pilot project for this new process improvement initiative, which resulted in adjustments to project budget and dates. Thereafter, Ted discovered that many project activities were having major delays, and cost overruns. Consequently, an extensive project rebudgetisation and replanification were performed, which lasted a few months. In parallel, Ted's planned departure date was approaching: He had planned, since the beginning, to leave the organization at a specific date, which was known and acknowledged by all management levels. At that time, everybody believed that TOBO would have been completed by this date. Thus, soon after rebudgetisation activities, Mark, the new project manager, was hired. Ted and Mark worked together during one month before Ted's departure. No other training was planned for Mark. When he took full charge of the project, four months were left to the development phase, which had started a year ago, and the test phase was next. Mark had to adapt quickly to a complex project and to the permanent organization. Ted had played a critical role, and the same was expected from Mark.

The replacement of the project manager was perceived as a clear-cut in the project timeline. During interviews, participants were referring to two main project periods: before and after Mark’s arrival. Mark was asked to perform tight scope management, but contrary to Ted, he complied. Additionally, although change requests were maintained continuously visible by Ted, and identified as project’s prerequisites, when he left, they were officially refused by the Strategic Committee and removed from all progress status and committees’ discussions. The strict scope control performed by Mark was perceived as a clash and was not received well at lower levels, especially by the pilots. The prime objective of the project was
perceived to have moved, from delivering a working functional solution, to finish the project as soon as possible, thereby providing a technical delivery.

Three months after Mark’s arrival, he provided his own evaluation of the project, asking additional budget in addition to the one already requested by Ted. Like Ted, Mark had to manage the resource availability issues of some teams, but now the project was near the end of the development phase. Afterward, in the early days of the test phase, software quality proved to be deficient, particularly the systems coming from the teams who were having been recurring resource availability issues. The test phase was stopped in order to create a stabilization period for the project. The new quality control processes allowed this decision: before, the usual practice would have been to deliver quickly the project as is and then, to fix errors directly in production: this allowed the project manager to have high priority access to required resources, but at the expense of the other projects.

4.3. The stabilization period

The stabilization period duration initially estimated to one month, finally lasted four. During the first weeks, additional problems were found by hundreds, and it was discovered that some IT systems were incomplete. A special IT team, led by Mark, was created. During this period, scarce and critical resources were monopolized, especially from the most problematic and critical team involved in the project. During this period, Mark produced daily progress statuses in order to provide managers with timely information about the stabilization activities and to put pressure on teams, which were part of this stabilization effort. After a first chaotic month, the situation began to show some slow improvements, and towards the start of the third month, it was possible to estimate that by the end of the fourth month, the stabilization would be completed.

The creation of the stabilization period has been well received, because it was a clear sign of the willingness to improve IT project quality. However, this period had a negative effect on the project credibility. The pilots were especially affected: these experts were not involved in these stabilization activities, which added to their perception that the project goal was not anymore to deliver a working functional solution. This loss of credibility, thus trust, was gradually communicated to future users and to all management levels in their own sector, including sponsors. In parallel, during the stabilization phase, Mark decided to limit his inter-sectors communication activities, including with pilots, due to his heavy workload.

4.4. Crisis outbreak

During the last month of the stabilization period, the progress was positive and Mark presented quantitative indicators showing this favorable progress, during various project meetings. However, a competing interpretation of the project status was gradually emerging among participants, increasing ambiguities and tensions. This emergence was corresponding with the surprised arrival of the new IT Vice-President (e.g.: IT VP), one week in advance; including his quick focus on TOBO project, for which he was requesting straight answers to his direct questions. This new VP was a newcomer in the organization, and his position was newly created in order to represent IT at the executive level. His arrival was thus positively viewed, especially in the context of a business IT project.

In fact, the collected field data showed that the IT VP arrival had a significant impact on the discourse related to the project end date that became increasingly ambiguous. This discourse began to change, but curiously with a denial of previous discourses, thus adding ambiguity. Project budget, scope and priority were also progressively challenged by the IT VP. The project goal discourse changed quickly from: finish the project as soon as possible (i.e.: technical delivery), to: deliver a project that works, while questioning the real project priority. A new focus was also put on the importance of delivering a working functional solution which would be well integrated with the deliveries of other projects. These discourses’ changes were demotivating Mark, who had set out to meet the demands of top managers to control the scope. In parallel, a negative discourse was emerging against him: this paradoxical discourse was acknowledging that Mark was relatively new to the project, that minimal support had been given to him, and that the project was complex; however, in parallel, Mark was found to be too slow in the understanding of this complexity, and of having too much IT focus, which brought him to maintain too strict scope management and resource control. This discourse also complimented Ted, the former project manager, although slightly conceding that both project managers have not managed the project during similar and comparable periods.

At the IT middle-manager level, the tension increased significantly following the pressure from the IT VP to get project evaluations: their first evaluation was strongly rebuffed by this VP, and they had to redo their work more seriously more than once, which increased tensions. This VP was not hesitating to reprimand them on their methods. In fact, the rules
were changing. What was acceptable before may no longer be. Additionally, the TOBO project was found to have a too high priority and to provoke major delays in other strategic projects. Thus, this project, which was previously identified as highly strategic, was now found to be strategic only because of its ever escalating budget.

A few weeks after his arrival, the IT VP triggered a tension burst, causing a crisis to start by performing a reorganization within which some top managers as well as some middle-managers were laid off. This reorganization wave also announced subsequent waves for the remainder of the structure. Thus, significant unexpected tensions occurred during a short period. Since interviews with some middle-managers occurred during this period, it made it possible to collect their testimony during these difficult circumstances.

Finally, after the field period, the following information about the project has been collected: the steering committee, and the strategic committee, would be and would remain on hold for the next four months, pending instructions from the IT VP on whether to continue or not the project. Two additional reorganization waves occurred, within which some middle-managers and Mark would be laid off. Before his departure, he realized that the resulting quality from the stability period was still inadequate. In fact, even if stabilization metrics were very positive, the test phase showed that quality was in contrast not there. Even if the strongest members of the most problematic IT team were under his management during this period, they kept their problematic practices until the end. The project continued, but was eventually divided into two main deliveries. Only the first delivery has been completed, resulting in a workload increase, in the operations of one business sector, due to the addition of some tedious processes coming from the other sector. And, 18 months after his arrival, the IT VP has been laid off. To date, the second delivery is still postponed.

5. Analysis

The data analysis is divided into two main sections: 1) the historical analysis of the crisis development, which is mainly based on the historical data obtained from project records and interviews; 2) the analysis of the crisis outbreak, which is mainly based on interviews and observations made during the field research period. Our main goal is to establish links between our research data and notions coming from the literature on organizational crisis management in order to deepen the understanding of the crisis phenomenon within projects, and thus of projects.

5.1. Historical analysis of the crisis

In this section, following the identification of the main types of issues encountered in TOBO project, we analyze their evolution based on the notion of organizational imperfections and its associated accumulation process [19]. We stop this analysis just before the crisis outbreak period, which is presented in the next section.

At the project start, there were four main types of issues: 1) Underestimation of coordination complexity: the main characteristics were multiple teams in matrix mode, integration of many IT systems, knowledge in silos, no solution architect; 2) Underestimation of project work: This was a usual practice to get the project approvals; 3) Unusual project’s scale: the project was characterized by having a high number of stakeholders, domains, IT systems, IT teams, and a long duration and large budget, compared to other projects; 4) Ambiguous project scope: the overall scope was vague, and the technical feasibility was lacking appropriate validation.

Thus, this project had many challenges and was a rather complex venture: the development and the integration of a flexible and efficient IT system were the ultimate goal. However, some permanent organization imperfections had a direct impact on the project. First, there was the underestimation of the work, which was a normalization of the deviance [24] that was putting an initial pressure on the budget. Secondly, the ever overlooked project complexity that is an ignorance of the complexity, which is a potential reason for absurd decisions [11]. This ignorance occurred repeatedly during the project inception, leaving associated project imperfections unresolved.

Even if the project manager was actively seeking to clarify the ambiguous scope, the project’s scale combined with its overall complexity made the scope management a constant challenge. The project success was highly dependent on having the appropriate scope defined. Pilots were the leading players in scope identification and its main gaps, which were translated into change requests. These requests were made visible, throughout the project by Ted, giving hope to the pilots in making them believe that these changes would eventually be approved. This way of proceeding would make it easier to accept a current absurd decision, because there would be hope for the future [11]. However, at the arrival of the new project manager, Mark, these change requests were suddenly formally rejected by the steering committee, and removed from project records, generating pilots’ loss of hope in obtaining an adequate working solution. Thus, even if a long time period is supposed to be an
important factor for collective acceptance [11], it was not sufficient in this case. After this formal refusal, the pilots remained displeased and began to disengage and to propagate their disillusion about the project in their sector. Consequently, some parts of the organization became aware of some organizational imperfections of TOBO project.

The project coordination remained a challenge throughout the project. The resource availability problems were quite important and were also part of the permanent organizational recurring problem. Middle-managers had to manage operations and to share resources with projects in matrix mode. Interestingly, the human mind may have difficulties to manage two priorities, thus to address two dimensions [11]. In addition, some teams were having major quality issues, which created a chronic lack of resource availability in projects, due to the required critical corrections. These imperfections were ignored by managers of the parent organization for a long time. In fact, there was a normalization of the deviance [24] at this level, which was reinforced by their annual incentives that were mainly based on their operations’ productivity.

These quality issues, combined with the project’s unusual scale, raised the project manager’s awareness about the imperfection of the quality control process of the parent organization. By successfully convincing the top management to improve the quality control process, the temporary organization was trying to force change on the permanent organization's imperfection by directly addressing the associated managerial ignorance. Interestingly, by doing this, the project manager earned a lot of respect. His actions were recognized by all. Even if he has been able to overcome the managerial ignorance, the organizational imperfection needed more time and efforts to get resolved; it was too late for the project.

Throughout the project, many organizational imperfections increased: these issues were especially about coordination and scope ambiguities. They were ignored in most part by the managers of the permanent organization. In fact, when these issues were brought to their attention, usual directives were about performing a strict management of project scope and budget; on the other hand, when some status reports were showing critical risks due to lack of resource availability, some short-term management actions were performed.

For the budget, at first, additional funding was granted to resolve imperfections related to the scope and quality issues that were considered obvious shop stoppers: the data migration overlook and the quality control process improvement. Afterwards, the following project escalation [23] started in the second half of the project calendar; 1) additional budget to complete the project, based on Ted’s evaluation; 2) then based on Mark’s evaluation; 3) after that, the stabilization period occurred; etc.

Throughout the project, the weekly progress reports were the only ones using clear indicators with colors to report status. Most of these indicators varied between yellow and red, throughout the project duration. These reports were provided only to the lower management level. For the various project committees, the progress status was using vague statements. However, progress status information is found to be important for decision makers to obtain accurate and reliable information, which is not always obvious. Interestingly, in the IS context, approximately 60% of project progress reports may be biased; this could have a direct impact on the performance evaluation of the project [9].

5.2. Analysis of the crisis outbreak

In this section, we analyze the outbreak of the crisis observed during our field research period, which started during the last month of the stabilization period. For this purpose, we often refer to Roux-Dufort model [19] of crisis development. We estimate that the project was in normalization phase when we began the field observations; project's metrics were positive and managers were enthusiastic about their efforts to ensure quality. However, we noticed some dysfunctions in the project coordination structure and a lack of global understanding of the solution, which implies a corresponding lack of understanding in its related scope issues. Nevertheless, as far as they were concerned, participants were aiming toward the end of the project. The project was clearly in a normalization phase.

Ambiguity and tensions began to rise with the arrival of the new IT VP; the situation became more complex, following his quick focus on the project. Suddenly, discourses about the project’s end date began to change, while previous discourses were denied; an awareness of the inability to determine the ending date of the temporary organization was emerging, creating uncertainty and tensions in the chain of command. Thus, by his challenging questions and judgments, the new VP was symbolizing the acute event that abruptly reveals the vulnerabilities, which triggers the disruptions and denial phase [19]. Even if the stabilization period had shown good metrics and reassuring discourses, the project seemed to be out of control, since no ending date could be planned with certainty; there was a clash in the discourses. In addition, the usual methods of evaluation performed by the managers were dismissed by the VP. This situation created a shock and a feeling of loss of control [19]:

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the project end date is a critical parameter for the temporary organization.

Thus, the project was under intense scrutiny; its scope, its real status, its budget and its end date. The interviews and observations performed during this period, showed signs of tension and emotion. They provided an excellent testimony of these feelings of loss of control and helplessness. The project was said to have a life of its own, while participants were refusing to accept any responsibility. During this period, many participants began to say that they had not been implicated in the project inception; thus, they were not to blame. Interestingly, participants were open to discuss the problems of the project and those of the permanent organization. They were very generous during interviews; which is acknowledging that during such a period, visibility of organizational imperfections is at a peak [19]. What became clear during this period was the influence that the pilots had on the crisis development; they felt betrayed by Mark, which had not followed Ted’s steps regarding change requests, which were perceived as being critical for having a functional working solution.

In fact, the notion of scapegoat was gradually emerging in participants’ discourse; Mark being the scapegoat. Surprisingly, Ted, the initial project manager, was washed off from most blames. Mitroff [10] suggests that one of the most striking and interesting features of crises, is that virtually without exception, they are experienced as major acts of betrayal, and that, paradoxically, this phenomenon is one of the least-studied, and least discussed aspect of crises. During crises, people need to have someone to blame, because it is one of the principal ways in which we cope with the strong feelings and emotions that crises’ stir up. Most acts of betrayal are unintentional; they are an unintended consequence of some behavior. In every case, betrayal is the violation of a basic and fundamental assumption we are making about an individual or an organization: the person will stand up for us, act in our best interests, and protect us. The persons that feel betrayed view themselves as victims and the other as the villain. Thus, Mark was the villain.

Thereafter, only a few days after his first evaluation requests, the IT VP bluntly decided to lay off some top and middle-managers, which triggered the crisis and its escalation phase. In this phase, internal and external vulnerabilities are both triggered [19]; the managers realized that they could not manage anymore the project (internally and externally) as they did before. These layoffs were also a clear message: this project had to be managed differently. In fact, all the chain of command of the project would be laid off in a four-month period, including the project manager. The project participants were experiencing great stress and uncertainty.

Therefore, the arrival of the IT VP brought a change in the framework analysis. Before, the focus of the managers was on the end date, and they felt they were almost there, near the end. Indeed, the perception of the proximity to the goal can support project escalation, which is known as the effect of the end [6]. The more one engages in a decision-making process, the more difficult it would be to go back and give it up (target obsession), because that requires significant cognitive and psychological efforts [11]. For de-escalation, costs must be clearly identified [26]. In a project, this usually means obtaining a clear and dependable status of the situation: the quantification of current costs must be made in relation to the estimated progression, and future costs must be extrapolated, clearly presented and considered reliable. This is what the IT VP was seeking to obtain.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we were aiming to understand how the observed crisis occurred, using notions borrowed from the crisis management literature. Our historical analysis of the project showed how the permanent organization imperfections had significantly affected the project in the building of its own imperfections. We also showed the role played by managers in letting these organizational imperfections accumulate and enlarge; thus, allowing associated managerial ignorance development, which creates space for deviance and then, normalization of unfit behaviors.

Our research data showed that, for the observed crisis outbreak, symptoms evoked in the crisis literature were observed for this internal crisis within a temporary organization. These main symptoms are scapegoating, rapid changes in discourses, refusal to accept responsibility, impulsive and irrational actions that are negative for the actor performing them. The borrowed notions helped to deepen the understanding of what happened during the crisis. In addition, we were also observed that during the short period of time when the crisis starts (catalyst period), the structure became especially visible in the project; participants were showing great openness during interviews, while trying to understand (make sense) of the tense and ambiguous situation. This period was also highly ambiguous for us, since discourses swiftly evolved, and previous versions denied by participants. Thus, verbatim, notes and recordings were precious tools in our quest for understanding, in this chaos.

We have also shown that projects can have a positive impact on the permanent organization imperfections, through appropriate sensibilization
(education) of managers to associated consequences; thus, diminishing the managerial ignorance in the permanent organization. In this study, the project manager played a significant role in this sensibilization, and he was also actively implicated in the corrective actions to be performed. However, the time required by the permanent organization to resolve its imperfection may be too long for the project timeframe, as it was the case for this study. Interestingly, during the observation period and afterwards, the organizational imperfection to be corrected was henceforth a priority, and the project manager's contribution to its identification was still highly recognized by all participants.

Finally, the role played by the first project manager was significant in minimizing the influence of the permanent organization imperfections in the project. The change of project manager, combined with the already high level of managerial ignorance at that time, has been an important facilitator for the propagation of these imperfections into the project. We suggest that the role and influence of project managers on these permanent organization imperfections, and on the associated managerial ignorance, should be studied further.

7. References