

Some personal reflections on contributions of certain “hidden” innate traits to important segments of my career ¹

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

This article is a retrospective exploration of how a couple of my innate personal traits – which I have described as “hidden” because I had been previously quite unaware of them – were uncovered, and how they contributed to some of the most important segments of my career, namely. those primarily concerned with helping other people.

A personal perspective on individuals’ innate traits, and my “hidden” traits

By innate personal traits I mean attributes which are inherent in, and particular to, the individual, and are normally exercised as naturally as breathing – often so naturally that the individual may be quite unaware of possessing these particular traits.

At a personal level, I will be discussing two of my own innate traits which actively contributed to my career – but which were “hidden” to me, in the sense that I had been quite unaware of having them until they were unexpectedly revealed, by two accidents of personal history. Both of these newly discovered traits enhanced the effectiveness of my career contributions, and one of them influenced the direction of my later career very substantially. Both were also closely associated with helping-other-people segments of my career, as now briefly discussed.

Helping-other-people as my most prominent career contribution

In Stretton 2022i, I commented on some questions asked by Pells 2021 about individuals’ career contributions and legacies. Pells 2021 asked the following questions.

....what will our legacies be? Individually and as a profession? What differences, what contributions will we make over our careers? These seem more important questions as I get older. Do we all need to accomplish great things? Do we need to become successful or famous? Does helping others matter? Does sharing knowledge and wisdom count?

In my comments on these questions, I identified a key personal recognition as follows.,

With the wisdom of hindsight, helping others is what my professional career has been largely about.

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If I were pressed on the question of overall career success, I would have to assess mine in terms of how effective my contributions to helping other people have actually been.

I don't have anything like sufficient data to make a validated assessment, but at least some of these contributions have been acknowledged by others as being successful, and I will focus on these in the following discussions.

Helping-other-people career segments and relevant “hidden” innate traits inputs

I will discuss the relevant helping-other-people segments of my career, and the emergence of, and inputs from, my “hidden” innate traits, under the following headings.

- Some direct formal education activities, and a key “hidden” innate trait
 - In-house management education presentations, and a key “hidden” innate trait
 - “Extra-curricular” teaching activities with tertiary education institutions
 - Development & delivery of a Master of Project Management course at UTS
- Informal role in sounding-board-type counselling revealed another hidden trait

However, before launching into more specific details, a few words on why I am offering this very personal article would appear to be in order.

Rationale for offering this article

My excuse for offering this somewhat self-indulgent exploration is that everyone has their own innate traits – i.e. attributes which are as natural to them as breathing. There are, almost certainly, many people, who like myself, have some “hidden” traits which could be very relevant to their careers, if they could be “brought out of hiding”. In both my own cases, the latter happened as a kind of accident of personal history. I don't know how similar revelations might happen for other people. However, I suspect that awareness of the possibility of unearthing and actively using such “hidden” innate traits might be a significant part of the answer. So, hopefully this article might help someone in this context.

We now look at my own experiences in this context in a little more detail.

SOME FORMAL EDUCATION ACTIVITIES, AND A KEY HIDDEN INNATE TRAIT

In-house management education presentations, and a key hidden innate trait

My introduction to formal education activities derived from a 1963 decision by my employer, Lend Lease, to acquire the L A Allen Profession of Management program, and to run it in-house – as discussed in more detail in Stretton 2026c. I was one of a

group of briefing/ discussion leaders who were trained in presenting this program. This training took the form of a week-long live-in program in early 1963.

I had never spoken in public up to this point, so this was a new type of experience in its own right. These training sessions included having each briefing leader make a complete presentation of one section of the management education program, followed by a mandated question and discussion phase.

My own presentation phase appeared to be acceptable for a beginner. But when we got to the question and discussion phase, I was asked a couple of quite difficult and somewhat barbed questions, to which I felt I did not respond all that well..

But our instructor, Dick Stoll, saw it differently. In fact, he said “Alan, you have a gift – that of responding to difficult questions extremely well, and without putting the questioner down”. To say that I was surprised would be a classic understatement – and I don’t believe I took his judgement too seriously at the time.

But as I made more and more presentations in the course of actually delivering this program, it became clear that Stoll’s judgement was correct. In fact, I loved fielding tricky questions. It not only stimulated me to try and respond most helpfully, but also appeared to encourage the participants to pursue discussions further. So, the discussion sessions were typically highly interactive, and the centre-point of this educational effort.

These discussion sessions also revealed a corollary of what I will call my discussion-related innate skills. Even when the discussions moved into broader territories, I found I had an apparently natural facility to relate them back to the particular management function we were discussing that day. This also surprised me somewhat, but would prove to be a bonus in some of my later educational activities, to which we now turn.

“Extra-curricular” teaching activities with tertiary education institutions

As I discussed in some detail in Stretton 2026d, I undertook a good deal of “extra-curricular” educational initiatives, mainly with local tertiary education institutions, whilst working full-time with Lend Lease. Most of these were teaching assignments in Graduate Diploma and Masters courses, in which the majority of students were mature-age, with varying amounts of experience in the subjects I was teaching – which were mainly project planning and management topics.

Here, again, I encouraged discussion on the materials I was presenting. Because most of the students had had some experience, I adopted a “shared experience” approach. I encouraged participants to share their experiences, particularly apparently contradictory experiences, with us all. My job was to try and help them resolve different perspectives, and to help them relate these to the basic frameworks I was providing. This “shared experience” approach thus became a dynamic kind of learning experience for everyone – and appeared to work very well.

Evidently my discussion-related innate skills were particularly appropriated for this type of educational situation with mature age students. This was also to be the case when I made a career move to join the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), as now discussed.

Development and delivery of a Master of Project Management course at UTS

I joined the newly created UTS (previously the NSW Institute of Technology) in January 1988, to lead the development and delivery of a new Master of Project Management course. I discussed what we did in some detail in Stretton 2025c, but will focus here on the discussion sessions, which became a key component of this course.

Once again we had mainly mature age students, who collectively had an absolute treasure trove of experience in project management and allied fields. So, it was natural to adopt the sharing experience approach to discussion sessions. These were always both lively and productive. Indeed on more than one occasion, these discussions indicated that we needed to modify our basic project process framework to reflect some important new insights which emerged from them. These modifications were always undertaken jointly with the students..

In short, we were all learning from one another, and the atmosphere was intensely stimulating. My discussion-related skills were similarly stimulated, and were more than up to the task, at least according to some who directly commented on this. Several of the participants, particularly those involved in teaching, openly stated their belief that the above approach was the best kind of education process they had experienced.

So, my formerly hidden discussion-related skills, which were uncovered when I was 36, became a very important direct contributor to my career for the next forty odd years.

I now move on to a second hidden innate trait, whose presence emerged rather more slowly than the above discussion-related trait.

INFORMAL SOUNDING-BOARD-TYPE COUNSELLING & ANOTHER HIDDEN TRAIT

I start this section by affirming that I have been a life-long introvert, and thence a long way from being what is often referred to as a peoples' person. Yet all sorts of people in Lend Lease used to come to me, totally informally, to discuss a wide range of problems – to the point where I had acquired a “Have you talked with Alan” reputation.

What was going on here? I obviously was bringing something to these discussions which was considered to be of value. However, it took me quite some time to work out what that something might be. Eventually, I think I pinned it down, as broadly discussed in Stretton 2022I.

In that article, I noted that the people who came to me with their problems were usually trying to tackle them in a reductionist way – trying to solve the problem by looking at its component parts, but not succeeding in synthesising these back into a better understanding of the whole problem. On the other hand, I would ask them questions about the context of the problem, and sometimes about the context of that context.

After our discussions, and due consideration, I would then respond to them along the lines of, “What I understand from what you have been telling me is”. In doing this, I would be giving them my more holistic perspective on their problems, as I understood them from what they had been telling me.

Usually, this appeared to work for them. Quite often there would be little or no further discussion – evidently this different perspective on their problems was giving them a fresh insight, which they could then further pursue on their own.. For those people who wanted to pursue it further with me, I would most often float ideas, but seldom gave direct advice. If they picked up on one of the ideas I had floated, and ran with it, then all to the good. It’s most effective when a person takes possession of an idea as their own

So, my relevant innate trait here was evidently a natural predisposition to first put a problem into its wider context, to help get a holistic perception of its nature. I do not know the origins of this attribute, but can recall having this type of propensity at quite a young age. This was not extinguished by a substantially reductionist educational upbringing – so, it does seem to qualify as an innate trait – but one that had been largely hidden to me in the context of its potential contribution to helping other people.

I should also note that, in retrospect, I believe that these informal sounding-board-type counselling interactions with so many people were amongst the most significant contributions I made in my entire career. So, my uncovered problem-context trait was a very significant one for me, as it evidently was also for many others.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

These have been some very personal retrospective thoughts about two of my “hidden” innate personal traits, which, when uncovered, contributed very significantly to some of the helping-other-people segments of my career.

The first of these, which I call a “discussion-related” innate trait, was an unexpected inherent facility for responding well to difficult and/or barbed questions in education-related discussion sessions. This turned out to be a primary factor in my developing a “shared experience” approach to my educational activities, which evidently work very well for over forty years, in three major segments of my long career. This was supported by an associated inherent ability to relate even “way-out” discussions back to the basic framework underlying the discussions.

The second of these, which I abbreviated to a “problem-context” innate trait, emerged from sounding-board types of engagements with many Lend Lease people who come to me, totally informally, to discuss wide ranges of problems. Typically, they would have dissected their problems into components, but this hadn’t helped. I usually questioned them about the context of their problem, and then fed back to them my understanding of their problem, but in a relatively holistic context. In most cases, this appeared to have helped, judging by my “Have you talked with Alan” reputation – and I believe this was one of the most significant contributions I made in my entire career.

In writing this, I have been very conscious of the fact that, although I was personally substantially unaware of my own relevant innate traits at the time, and/or of their actual (and potential) contributions, there are almost certainly others who have been well aware of their own innate traits, and have consciously utilised them to support their acquired skills.

I did not have the good fortune to have such conscious awareness – and from direct observation, I am sure that there are many others who are similarly unaware of the nature of their own relevant innate traits.

Therefore, as I noted in the Introduction, a key reason for offering this very personal exploration is that it might help alert some others to possibilities of identifying and linking their own previously “hidden” innate traits with their acquired skills, and of thence benefitting their careers, and/or others, accordingly.

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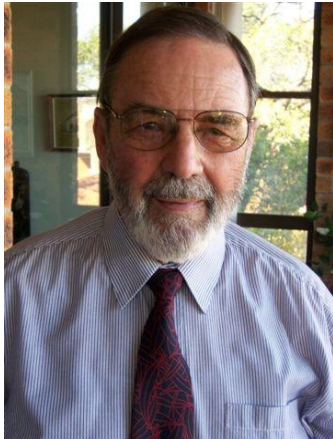
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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. Alan has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published 280+ professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.

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