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Title: On Stupidity in Project Management: A Critical Reflection of PM in a VUCA World

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Summary:

This paper explores the role of "stupidity" in project management within the context of a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world. While project complexity is often blamed for failures, the authors argue that it frequently serves as a convenient excuse for poor decision-making and irrational stakeholder behavior. Through an analysis of 1,064 survey responses from project management practitioners, the study reveals that stakeholders fail to engage with complexity in a meaningful way, often demonstrating decision-making that borders on irrationality—what the authors term "stupidity."

The research highlights how project stakeholders frequently disregard common sense, misunderstand complexity, and mismanage projects due to cognitive biases, lack of critical thinking, and adherence to rigid structures. The authors frame this phenomenon within the concept of "functional stupidity," a term from organizational theory describing the avoidance of reflexivity, justification, and substantive reasoning. They argue that project failures are often not just due to external complexities but also due to an internal unwillingness to challenge flawed assumptions and practices.

Furthermore, the paper suggests that traditional project management approaches, which emphasize control and predictability, are ill-suited for complex environments. Instead, the authors advocate for systemic thinking and adaptive management strategies that acknowledge the unpredictable nature of modern projects. The study calls for further research into the interplay between project complexity, stakeholder behavior, and the impact of cognitive biases on decision-making.

Reference:

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