



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the International Conference on Project Management
Reykjavík
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Distinguished delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that we welcome the International Conference on Project Management to Iceland, especially since in many ways the history of our country offers interesting challenges, reflections and approaches in the field of project management.

From the settlement by the Vikings more than 1100 years ago and until the beginning of the 20th century the Icelandic nation numbered less than 100 thousand people and had consistently been among the poorest nations in Europe and struggled constantly against the mighty forces of nature: volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, heavy storms and severe winters.

In the 1840s a group of Icelandic students in Copenhagen began to publish a yearbook of articles, essays and poems which laid the foundation for the independence movement which a century later led to the establishment of the Icelandic republic.

Let us imagine that we are sitting around a table then with these enthusiastic Icelandic students in a small inn offering cheap wine and bad beer in one of the narrow alleys in central Copenhagen, and someone suggests that in due course this smallest and poorest nation in Europe – a colony without any rights to self-determination and the victim of a trade monopoly enforced by the King's representatives – would in the future reach one of the highest living standards in the world, enjoy full political and sovereign rights in the community of nations, build roads and bridges, hospitals and schools, harbours and airfields in all parts of the country, enjoy information technology so advanced that, measured in mobile phones, Internet connections and personal computers per family and household, Iceland would rank among the top nations in the world.

Moreover, its cultural life would be based on a number of professional theatres, an opera and a symphony orchestra; and every week in the Reykjavík area during the artistic season from September to June one would be able to enjoy between twenty and thirty different theatrical productions, a dozen or so concerts and many exhibitions by painters, sculptors and glass artists; the publication of books per capita would be the highest in the world and in the beginning of the 21st century there would be six universities of international standard in the country; all this achieved by a nation which at the beginning of the 20th century still numbered only about 100 thousand people without home rule or any sovereign rights then, and at the end of that century would still only have a population of just over a quarter of a million people.

Probably even the most sophisticated and learned project manager, on that rainy evening in Copenhagen in the autumn 1845, would have advised the young enthusiasts that it could not be done, then thank the students for their cheap wine and, after joining his wealthy friends at one of Copenhagen's best nightclubs, would have made hilarious fun of these crazy Icelanders.

Well, crazy or not, here we are, at the opening of the 21st century, enjoying these extraordinary results and still foolhardily telling ourselves that we can manage to hold our own in comparison with any nation on earth.

How would you have managed the project Iceland all those decades ago? What advice would you have given in the dark days of the Depression and throughout the Second World War? How should a nation be guided when the foundation of its economy was challenged by foreign fishing fleets in the 1950s and to the 1970s, with the British even sending the Navy to guard their interests?

I know that such questions are not among the everyday tasks and deliberations that engage project managers in our modern world but I refer to this history and the example of my country to remind us all how extraordinary are the achievements which previous generations brought about and how unbelievable is the journey we have travelled in recent times and also to challenge us to see how different elements and projects slowly but surely create a comprehensive reality which enables a nation to develop and survive, progress and excel.

How do we explain this achievement, the creative forces which have brought all this about? What is it in people that makes them reach for the impossible? What is the role of culture, of the heritage which provides us with identity and standards of reference as society marches on towards a better world? How do we obtain the certainty that gives us the power and

conviction to advise others how to manage their affairs? How profound is the science of management in the modern world? How would the pioneers of Icelandic independence have been advised more than a hundred years ago?

Today's fashion is not necessarily the best yardstick by which to judge tomorrow, but the lessons of history can certainly help us to balance our perspectives and to warn us against prejudging what is possible and what is beyond our reach. Our small nation offers many challenging examples of projects solutions in different fields and the Icelandic experience can serve as a laboratory guideline, a microcosm of the tasks facing the larger world, an encouragement to think daring thoughts, to challenge the prevailing norms of what is possible and where the outer boundaries of achievement lie.

The topics to be discussed at your conference in the coming days certainly reflect the innovative approaches and current tasks in project management and I hope that the spirit of our country will also encourage you to reflect on the lessons history has to offer.

In our vision of the future we can indeed be inspired by the extraordinary achievement of those who, generations ago, decided to proceed despite the high odds against success. We witness their daring with humility and respect and in following their example we can certainly look forward to exciting times.

With these reflections I welcome you all to Iceland and express the hope that your deliberations will strengthen the basis for our future progress.