The
PINK MACHINE PAPERS

Romanticism and Pragmatism in Projects

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Abstract

This paper describes on of the approaches taken at the Pink Machine Research Project when studying project management. Very shortly, our approach is based on the belief that projects are a form of work whose mechanism can be best understood as a mixture of two driving forces: Romanticism and Pragmatism.

On the one side, projects are often presented as heroic endeavors: a situation has come up, an opportunity not to be lost, an organizational change that has to be carried out, a sale that is vital for the survival of the company; someone must take the responsibility, they will have to drive the whole process on, bring the ship in the harbor. This is the Romantic driving force, the wish to make big things, the craving for adventure.

On the other side, managing projects is, according to our empirical data, very much about solving practical situations: moving the process on. Most often than not, it is a matter of small decisions, made on the fly, without much analyzing. This is the Pragmatic driving force, the desire to see things happen, to see them work.

This paper was presented at the Founding Conference of European Management Research held in Barcelona in April 2001.

Romanticism

Projects are often presented as heroic endeavors: a situation has come up, an opportunity not to be lost, an organizational change that has to be carried out, a sale that is vital for the survival of the company; someone must take the responsibility, it is up to this person to drive the whole process on; there is a clear goal, something that has to be achieved.

As soon as a clear goal is proposed the whole process is described as a project: "We have to raise our market share to 34%", for instance. "And this is how we are going to do it:..." At once all the spirits from romanticism are summoned: the hero, the goal, the enemies, the dangers lurking in the way, the difficulties that the expedition will have to surpass. The crusades, the discovering voyages, the expeditions to the poles, to the jungle; the stories of all these feats have influenced the way in which companies describe projects.

This vision of projects has strong aesthetic influences, it includes concepts such as "feat", "passion", "friends & enemies", "hate & love", all of which are to be found in the artistic movement of European Romanticism. It is the association with these concepts that make projects such powerful tools for organizing. They often appeal to the more adventurous side of humans making them feel like "something big is going to happen and you are going to be a part of it".

But not only descriptions of projects made by management have romantic aspects. Far more romantic in that sense are the after-hand reconstruction given by the project members. Those stories are told from the point of view of one that "knows" - "I was there", "we were facing terrible odds ... nothing worked ... we really had to do our best..."-, resulting in even more fabulous accounts.

We seek to carry out semiotic studies of project descriptions (both beforehand and after-hand) in order to throw some light on the structures upon which the concept of "project" is based. We do not seek to obtain a model of "what to do to become a more efficient project manager" but are rather interested in the semiotic components of the concept "project". What do we associate it with, what are the common cultural mechanisms that control what we understand as "project"? This is, in a way, a study of what is the concept "project" built of, what sort of blocks does it contain?

This description of "project" can be made to include as many different landscapes as one whishes. It can be made very small and very large: What sort of people should be interviewed? What sort of newspapers read? Whose idea of "project" should we study? The planner's, the worker's, the financier's, the researcher's? Different answers to these questions will yield different research studies but we are, at least initially, interested in one view in particular: The view of those that carry out the project.

Pragmatism

The "people that carry out the project" is certainly a loose definition, and as a definition as good as it can be. In our initial study it means the Wartsila employees sent to another land with the

responsibility of building a diesel power station: a group of about a dozen men, including project managers and technical experts. For lack of a better word we will call them 'projecteers'. This sort of project is very similar in its structure to heroic tales such as the Odyssey and the Iliad, and it is therefore well suited for a first approach at the romantic aspects of the concept "project".

But if we limit our effort to the semiotic analysis of descriptions we will miss an important part of the project: its execution. Both before-hand and after-hand descriptions of processes are generally strongly stylized, most often making the whole story look as a long rational development of problems and solutions. In our data we have also seen that they are tinted with heroic values in order to (assumedly) make the project look as either something exciting in which the listener would like to get involved or a deed reserved to those with the resources of the teller.

We therefore intend (and have already started doing so) to study how the projecteers talk and describe the ongoing process *during* the process. When analyzing these descriptions one finds a whole length of aspects that seldom, if ever, appear in the after-hand reconstruction or in the before-hand plans. It is not only difficult to integrate them in either sort of description but also difficult to find a place for them in the story, they do not really fit. Also, there is many of them and an account of the project (before-hand or after-hand) that included everything that happened (or will happen) would be extremely long.

In one of the projects which we were observing (one of the team was at the site from the beginning to the end, taking notes everyday and writing a diary) something unexpected happened: The truck that was transporting the 50 Tons central motor drove off the road and fell into a rice field (India). It began to sink and it had to be fished out of there as soon as possible. This event had of course an enormous impact in the site activities. The whole attention was focused on the sinking motor-monster. How could it be fished out? How could it happened, to start off with? The situation was, as is described in the diary "desperate". The power station had to be up and running by a certain date and every day of delay cost the company millions in fines. A week of delay was enough to eat the profit margins up. And the motor kept sinking in the soft soil of the rice fields. A few days later a possible solution was found: A crane had been rented and was driven to the field. But once the crane was there and started to pull the motor out, it itself started sinking. Now they had a 50 Tons motor and a 30 Tons crane sinking in the rice field and the days were ticking.

After the project had been carried out we held the usual interview with the project manager. We asked him if he could tell us how the project had gone. "Well, it has been difficult at times but we managed, nothing special". "- But what about the sinking motor?" "- Oh well, yeah, the driver messed it all up a bit, but it worked out".

The story of how the motor was fished up still lives on today, of course, but if you want to know what the situation looked like, what implications a sinking motor in the rice fields of India has, you'll have to have been there then, because it is now impossible to get that. The story has different versions, indeed, but all of them have a similar structure: that of the rationally correct heroic tale.

Our goal is to be able to describe the project as a continuous play of forces. In the process of a project there are many forces that influence the outcome. Economic forces, the strive to make

profit, the size of the budget, the price of oil; Technological forces, the limits set by what can be transported, the knowledge on material engineering, the efficiency of diesel engines in power stations, communication; Human forces, the skill of the employees, the political situation at the site, the leadership, human resources; and so on. All these forces are in at the same time, so to speak, creating and destroying patterns according to which the projecteers have to act.

This is the sort of description that we are after: The projecteers find themselves in a mesh of circumstances. The circumstances do not only come from the impersonal forces as described above, they are also the fruit of the history of projects that they have been through, of the fact that they are all men, of the internal alliances and struggles, of their love&hate relationship with the mother organization (in Finland), and so on and so forth. Through the names given to things, or the jokes told about yesterday's events or a hundred other symbolic devices, a pattern emerges. This pattern tells the projecteers how things are, it filters the unlimited set of circumstances around each situation and makes reality understandable. The pattern changes continuously, a sinking engine in a rice field is but one of the forces (quite extraordinary though) that form part of the situation. And here is where pragmatism comes in: The projecteers cannot really be helped by theoretical tools when they are immersed in the pattern, models obtained from abstractions simply do not apply. They have to rely on very simple actions, long driven analytical studies of other projects are too far away. They are glad if they can get a few things done, one at a time, but done.

From our last visit to a construction site, this time in south-west India: "There's a group of men (projecteers) sitting in the office talking passionately about how they've just managed to get the cooling tower ready and how they finally got one of the subcontractors to send a timetable for the coming week. It would also seem that the material to parts of the steam-system have left the factory. The men talk joyfully about how luck is on their side this week. It just happens to be so that even the blueprint for the steam-system has arrived, which means that one of the activities that runs with a delay of months could get started next week. The initial plan from the mother organization has finally been left aside, no more updating is made on it, even if the initial deadline is still valid. The MS-project files have been changed for Excel-prints for each month, which have been updated with color pencils. The project, which spanned over 14 months, made of carefully divided parts in the form of thick black lines in a Gatt-Scheme is now a two-week plan of independent colorful columns. This is as much as can be made with the material, blueprints and human resources that are on the site now and those which can be assumed to arrive next week. It is not beautiful, at least not if compared with the ordered, aesthetically appealing planning and following-up procedures that we organization theorists love to tinkle with. But it seems to work. Down here the beautiful is that which works, how the models and the calculation schemes are to work and to be used is less important. Their success is only measured by results, not by the strictness of their inner logic."

What is a plan? How can it be understood from the perspective of playing forces and patterns? What is a delay? What is a sinking engine? What role do milestones play? And how can intelligence, experience, common sense, memory, in a word, humans, be incorporated in the picture? As soon as we get humans in it all gets at least one level more of complexity: they are conscious of what is going on, and this very consciousness changes what is going on, which in turn... If we are to include humans in the play of forces that make up the circumstances we have to find a way to deal with that feedback loop.

We do not think we are going to solve anything. The questions asked (as those examples in the above) are not meant to be answered, they are just points of light around which to discuss. Our research project does not include normative illusions, we just want to be able to know a bit more about projects. What we think however, is that the fact that these highly emotional and "romantic" narratives evolve in the community of projecteers, influences the way the execution of a project is performed, and must therefore not be neglected but instead incorporated in the way we understand the concept of project and project work.

Our research idea has been inspired by the work of Paul Feyerabend, Claes Gustafsson, Lars Herzberg, Bruno Latour, Andrew Pickering and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others.

Stockholm, September 2000