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A Manifesto Projects are First of All a Human Adventure: Why You Can't Manufacture Projects on a Standardized Assembly Line

In particular for Large, Complex Projects involving hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of people, organizations tend to rely excessively on processes and 'sound principles of management'. They forget how these endeavors remain human adventures, where leadership, emotions, suffering and team spirit have also their part to shape the success of the adventure. These factors actually will often make the success – or the failure - of these projects

How project organizations are swamped by the counterproductive obsolete Industrial Age Mindset

In our Industrial Age mindset we often conceive successful organizations as smooth running operations that apply consistently, and obediently, well conceived processes. It might work to a certain extent for manufacturing operations (until the product they churn out so efficiently will become obsolete for lack of innovation). It cannot at all be relevant for one-of-a-kind endeavors like projects which always involve creativity, agility in the face of the unknown and leadership in a complex, unpredictable environment. In spite of this, most project-based organizations still keep as an ideal the manufacturing organization.

- As if manufacturing projects, churning out projects one after the other on some giant assembly line, had any sense.
- As if the people that execute projects only had to obediently follow the procedures, with their productivity closely monitored and timed.
- As if, like in the Ford factory, workers were just cheap replacement machines that should not think. Just bodies that are hired based on a standard job profile, interchangeable, cheap.
- As if implementing systems like ERPs that only seek to standardize behaviors across the board made any sense in project organizations.

Think about your project organization. How much do you recognize there the initiatives that are being taken?

Everybody that has been in a project knows that it does not work that way. What makes projects successful are people who take initiative, who lead; teams that work together to realize incredible feats. The success of the project is often the result of incredible hardship and tears of a few dedicated individuals that go above and beyond any written procedure to get it done. Yes, they do take shortcuts at times (unknown to senior management that don't want to hear about it for a number of legal reasons). People are what make projects a success.

There so much of a distance between the ideal of the senior management (and of the market) and the reality of

project execution. Those successful project companies will be those that overcome this Industrial Age mindset of conformity and standard processes to leverage on what makes the world of project execution so attractive to today's adventurers: it remains one of those areas where the term 'human adventure' has a true meaning. It remains one of those areas where individuals can easily make a difference.

Leveraging the power of emotional bond

Because projects are human adventures, establishing a close emotional bond between the team members is a key success factor that is often neglected by the organization or not done for cost reasons. Often, it is because

managers see the cost and not the return on investment. What does it imply? It requires the face-to-face interaction of the key team members in situations that will ensure that an emotional bond is created effectively and quickly. Those situations generally imply bringing the team members outside their comfort zone as a team (otherwise named 'teambuilding'). It implies travel to bring the team members at the same place, time for a few days, and some cost for event organization. Compared to the long term benefits of having established this emotional connection between team members, which will last even if the team is geographically spread during project execution, these costs are very minimal.

Back to the basics: in project-based organizations, systems and process standardization should be primarily about knowledge management and communication, not compliance

Of course, successful project organizations still need to have a number of standard building blocks that are applied consistently in each project to make the organization a bit efficient. There might even be some compliance standards that might have to be applied. What we plead here is that it shall remain the minimum administrative standards and should be mainly oriented towards knowledge management. It should help the team instead of hindering it.

What those standard building blocks should be depends on whether the organization does relatively standard

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types of projects (for example, one type of plant after the other), or whether the project it does are quite always different. It should cover a minimum in terms of financial reporting, procurement and engineering standards.

The most important is that the common systems designed in project-oriented organizations should be developed having in mind the development and exchange of knowledge, rather than compliance to an exact process. For example, procurement systems are much more valuable if they give a direct access to all the procurement files of other similar projects than if they force the project team in such a tightly compliance- controlled process that the team will effectively have to take more or less approved shortcuts to successfully deliver the project.

Because it is a Human Adventure, projects require adventurers. And they are rare in our Industrial Age societies

When will a leading project organization pass on a classified ad like Shackleton did before he embarked for his fateful trip with the Endurance to Antarctica:

“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.”

Still such an ad would still be so relevant to project management today. What we are looking for in a project are individuals that are self-motivated, able to take initiative, to think out of the box, to be entrepreneurs at time, and do what it takes (even if it is not particularly glamorous). Exactly not what a manufacturing worker should be (obedient and disciplined). Exactly not what most public school systems have been designed to produce. This is why we often find that successful projects team members come from underprivileged social classes that made themselves on their own, are various types of misfits and in general, are people who would never work obediently in a factory. And because the world increasingly needs projects, and because these people are rare as they happen not to be what our

societies have designed the perfect citizen to be, they're expensive (good for them!).

Those project organizations that will be successful will be those that will leverage on the human adventure concept

Moving fast forward what we see in the project industry is that experience project personnel are often leaving those project organizations that become too big and/or too bureaucratic to join less established and structured

younger, smaller organizations where they can make a difference. It is not fate or greed: it is because that's where they know they can find this spirit of human adventure.

Successful project organizations will not let bureaucracy and compliance ruin the human adventure spirit. They will rather leverage on the extraordinary power of this human adventure, by fostering instead of hindering informal knowledge exchange and story-telling, networking and emotional level exchange. They will make use of the extraordinary power of Collaborative Age social networks to develop even stronger emotional bonds. They will let people take initiatives and realize projects in a way that has not been done before. They will learn from all possible experiments rather than try to fit everything in a single compliant mold.

Conclusion: Bureaucracy is incompatible with project success.

The Industrial Age organization was bureaucratic. managed. compliant. Don't believe one moment that the project organization needs to be like a manufacturing organization.

Project organizations that will be successful on the longer term will be leveraging the human and the emotional connections, create a dense network of communication and knowledge sharing, letting a collection of adventurers successfully deliver the most amazing realizations that we need.



We Empower Organizations to be Reliably Successful in
Executing Large, Complex projects.

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