

Performers on the Project Stage

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Identity and Performance

In this article I will propose that people engaged in the management of projects can profitably think of themselves as performers, and the world of projects as the stage on which they play their roles. Performances are highly revealing. It is through their performances that managers establish their reputations. Their credibility is built not on their knowledge (for example of mechanised practices or administrative procedures), but on their actions, making decisions, setting the agenda. Through understanding performance we can also look into matters of identity – the sort of person you must be to put on this or that performance.

This way of thinking can have major implications for project managers. An enriched understanding of what it means to be a professional in the project world (and the sort of project manager you are striving to be) can help individual managers as they learn to perform their roles, and as they make development and career choices.

Example – recovering under threat

As a very short example we can look at the story of Sally, a newly appointed Project Manager in IT development. At first she thinks she is doing very well, but subsequently she realises that a senior manager is spreading doubt about her competence, and undermining her ability to manage effectively. She feels anger and then disappointment, but eventually finds her way forward through a strategy of close engagement with the team, especially those who report to the senior manager in question. She describes her approach as:

“... working directly with the team members to understand their tasks and their challenges, thus educating myself enough to be an informed advocate of the team. On a daily basis, I sat down with each member of the development team ... Team members started to feel comfortable coming to me to discuss issues, knowing that I would do my best to help resolve those issues ...”

Through this strategy she gains their confidence, and subsequently that of the manager.

An examination of her story reveals the main elements of what she must have, if she is to play out this strategy successfully. These are:

- the allegiance of the team – the sense of embedment
- her tools of the trade – quite limited in scope, concerned with task definitions and work analysis
- her personal talents for collaboration and her strong analytical skills – working out what is to be done
- speaking the right language (talking the talk) – arguing that analysis (finding

solutions to problems) and trust are the essence of good management.

Her managerial performance is founded on immersion, trustworthiness and reliability. I call Sally's mode of managing the 'Analyst'.

Contrasts – other styles

There are big differences between Sally's adopted managerial style, as she pulls herself through her time of difficulty, and other ways of being a project manager. There is a very sharp contrast, for example, with another mode, which I refer to as the 'Enforcer'. The Enforcer lives in a world of hierarchies, rules, contracts and obligations.

Parties to a project have clear responsibilities, have committed to deliver their part of the work, and are themselves responsible for resolving any problems that arise. Enforcers present themselves as the bringers of order, preventing that slide into chaos. Their formula for project success is to hammer out a plan to completion and then stick to it. At meetings they lay down the agenda and silence divergent discussions. Their job is to keep everyone in line.

These different modes of managing, I consider to be archetypes. They are standard social performances which managers can use to set the project agenda. My own research has found a total of six archetypes for project managers (although I am prepared to believe there are others). They are:

The Analyst: Immerses in detail, interrogation and logical analysis with the project team, to resolve problems and issues.

The Enforcer: Deals in systems of authority, contracts, rules, and the law, extracting promises and enforcing them.

The Expert: Acts to bring others into line with the processes of a professional discipline.

The Impresario: Operates through personal deals, rule-bending, and dramatic events to lead a value-creating adventure.

The Master of Ceremonies: Operates through openness, pauses and reflection, and resolution of social conflict through discussion.

The Reshaper: Operates through political moves, making and breaking alliances, reframing the project (and changing the rules) when necessary.

Implications – identities and careers

Those are, very briefly, some descriptions of the performances of project managers. How does this perspective benefit us?

Our main gain comes from transforming our understanding of what it is that makes a project manager. Instead of conceptualising a manager as the possessor of a simple

(but rather lengthy) list of skills, we can move towards a fuller, more rounded, description of how those skills are deployed to support an effective performance. We can move towards an understanding of the manager as a human being – the person you need to be to take effective action. This understanding will include allegiances (the community you belong to), technical tools crucial to the performance, and personal wherewithal (talents and psychological resources). Very importantly, it encompasses the manager's way of speaking: about the nature of projects and their management, and the type of impact one has through acting as a manager.

The perspective also changes our understanding of the individual development process, of how we learn to be a project manager. If we are defined by a mere set of skills, we then acquire our bag of tools, from which we can, presumably, take out the tool we need at any time. That is all it takes. But a fully formed identity, on the other hand, takes time to establish. It is not just a matter of learning how to put on the act, but also of having the world recognise the nature of the role we perform, and accepting our legitimacy as the person who can perform that way.

The identity perspective also raises important questions about flexibility. Is it feasible, for example, for a successful Analyst to appear at work one day wearing the hat of an Enforcer? And if they did so, would their new rule-enforcing persona do irreparable damage to that existing team-hugging persona and prevent an effective return to Analyst mode? In my view it does.

And so, on one hand there will be those who, on seeing a list of six archetypes of performance, will declare their intent to play them all, and strive against the odds to do so. Others of us however will prefer to focus on playing one mode in a credible and coherent manner. We may one day choose to change our managerial identity, but that change is more likely to be in the nature of a long-term transition, a career progression, rather than something we switch, at will, from day to day. We can also note that, from a personal standpoint, changing your managerial identity is not necessary. Many people build highly successful and satisfying careers playing a single archetypal style of being a manager.

The lesson for project managers is to be aware of your mode of performance – your managerial identity – and strive to improve its effectiveness, in whatever form it takes. However it is also good to have the possibility of change in your mind. In particular, those moments of uncertainty and doubt, when the direction of a project seems unclear, can often be grasped as opportunities for a new 'you' to take to the stage, to establish yourself as a different sort of player, and in so doing set your career on a new path.

Reference: Charles Smith (2014) *'Playing the Project Manager'*

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1502444968>

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Charles Smith has been researching project management over the last ten years. He has over 30 years' experience in the engineering and financial services industries, holding management and consulting positions in engineering design, structural dynamics, safety and risk management, project management and organisation change. Originally qualifying as an engineer, Charles also has a degree in psychology, and is a Founder Member of the Association for Business Psychology. Charles can be contacted at charles@projectcraft.org.uk. For more information, visit <http://projectcraft.org.uk>