The Private Life of Project Managers – The Social Struggle

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Abstract

The Private Life of Project Managers is a conceptual paper that takes a Darwinian approach to the concepts, practices, and behaviours of project managers. It contends that evolutionary science can help understand why project managers do what they do, and why they sometimes engage in convoluted, intricate, and occasionally devious or contradictory activities.

This conference paper examines some of the day-to-day habits of the modern project manager and of their group behaviour, and how these lead to their survival and advancement in the complex corporate world rather than making a direct positive impact on the project.

The intention of the paper is to make the case for a new way of thinking about project managers and their projects which embraces their human fallibilities and the often unpredictable nature of their project work.

Introduction

Evolutionary principles apply just as much in the corporate environment as they do in the grassy meadow or grassland savannah. All living creatures are struggling to survive, and those of us alive today have successfully survived because we have, over an enormous amount of time, been built by natural selection to survive. Survivability is literally in our biological and cultural wiring which has been shaped through the mechanism of selection by the living creatures around us and the physical and cultural environments we are immersed in.

The intention of this conference paper is to begin a conversation with the practitioner and scholarly community that explores the private world of the project manager through the lens of evolution.

Just as in the natural world the construction of the magnificent peacock's tail is inextricable from peahen preferences, so this paper attempts to highlight that the traits and behaviours of the modern project manager are entangled with preferences of modern senior management and project stakeholders.

I begin with an overview of the Darwinian approach to evolution which is particular because it puts forward the case that change happens because there are various mechanisms of selection in play. Within this section I explain how various cultural entities (project management memes) come to be written in to the particular cultural environment where project managers are most likely to be found, and no matter how varied a project manager's individual perceptions of a project are the ever present memes of project management will powerfully influence their behaviour and way of thinking. I then set the scene for the next section on competitive and cooperative behaviour by highlighting some of the governing principles of the project managers' habitat. Furthermore I point out the varied perceptions project managers have of projects and give an example of one of the memes that drive their behaviour. The section on competitive behaviour deals with some of the tools and techniques project managers use to compete with other project managers for the attention of senior management and the prize of another role as project manager. The section on cooperative behaviour highlights, again from an evolutionary point of view, how project managers do cooperate in a way that brings stability to their environment and secure their role. Unfortunately, this cooperative behaviour is detrimental to the innovation of new project management concepts and practices.

A Darwinian approach

Generally speaking the methods of a Darwinian approach to social science research are founded on the epistemological framework of co-evolution which regards human values, preferences, artefacts and behaviours as evolutionary adaptations that have been selected in the same way one would regard bipedal walking in humans or the iridescent coloured plumage of the peacock. In biological evolution the plants and animals alive today have been selected because of their beneficial features or traits. Selection takes many forms, such as; artificial selection where the human preference for

milk drives the modern cows to have huge udders; natural selection where the preferences of predators drives features such as speed, mimicry or camouflage in the predator and its prey or the constraints imposed by the environment enable animals with the thicker fur to survive; and sexual selection where the preferences of a mate such as the peahens drives peacocks to grow fantastical tail feathers. In short, being selected preservers the genes of an organism. The genes are the molecular recipes or instructions of how to build a particular organism with its specific features and behavioural traits. And it is these genes or molecular replicators that get passed on from generation to generation.

Selection takes place in the human social environment too, where ideas, concepts, cultural practices and artefacts are selected for their various benefits by humans on their own behalf and on behalf of their organisations or other community groups. In a similar way that features and behaviours of biological organisms are selected and genes for building these organisms are indirectly preserved and passed on, so the various features of concepts, cultural practices and artefacts are selected and the instructions of how to build and use them are indirectly selected and passed on to others. These instructions or recipes for building and using cultural artefacts or practices are called memes, and the study of how they are passed from person to person is called memetics[1]. Moreover, a memetic or social evolutionary approach to project management has been developed by Whitty [2], and it is this particular cultural evolutionary approach that underpins the theoretical framework of the discussion ahead.

Written in their memes

The memetic approach to project management research argues that the role of the project manager is built in the western corporate environment by various co-evolving memes (replicating cultural instructions) of project management and not consciously crafted to implement a business strategy as one would traditionally expect [2]. Furthermore, the role of project manager functions as a vehicle for transporting the various project management memes throughout the project manager's habitat and contributing to the various social mechanisms (e.g. the various project management professional institutions which I will discuss shortly) for replicating and spreading them to others.

By way of explaining how memes drive human behaviour and create cultural features or artefacts I will employ the biological analogy of the peacock and its spectacular tail growing abilities. It is hard to consider a peacock's tail to be something other than an impediment to its survival. It is large,

heavy, difficult to carry, needs energy to grow, and makes the animal conspicuous to predators. Nevertheless, the peacock's tail is the way it is, and it has got that way by the preferences of peahens. The tail appears to work like a cue or advertisement for fitness and health, as only fit and healthy peacocks can afford to grow them.

In the early stages of peacock evolution (when their ancestors looked very little like the present day bird), all offspring were (and still are) slight variations of their parents because the replication of their genes is not 100% perfect. Some will be fitter and more biologically stable than others. Some fit and healthy peacocks channel energy into growing plumage and survive long enough to reproduce with the peahens who are attracted to them, and this plumage growing and being attracting to plumage trait get passed on to offspring. The tail becomes 'wired in' to both the peacock and the peahen. I will return to this 'wired in' concept shortly when I discus the particular meme of the Gantt chart.

Figure 1: Gene vs. Meme Environment

As the genes for growing beautiful peacock tails resides in the bodies of a population of peacocks and peahens (Figure 1 left side), so the memes that generate the behaviours and artefacts of project management resides in particular Human populations and can be found in project management textbooks, course notes, in copies of the *PMBOK® Guide*, in Youtube presentations on project management, and as vast networks of interconnecting cells in the brains of project management practitioners and scholars, and similarly in the brains of senior management and project stakeholders (Figure 1 right side). As the plumage of peacocks is written in their genes, so the concepts, practices and artefacts of the project managers are written in their memes.

Habitat

The habitat or particular cultural environment where project managers are frequently found has been characterised by the term "projectistan" [3]. It is a particular self-sustaining cultural environment where the concepts, practices and artefacts of projects and project management, including that of the role of project manager thrive. Projectistan (-

istan meaning land or place of) is described as a Projectocracy (-ocracy indicates a type of rule), a cultural society governed by its awareness of projects and project management. In Projectistan therefore, benefits are bestowed on people and business entities such as project managers that have various *PMBOK*® derived credentials such as PMP® or variations of these such as RegPM, and organisations that display their project management capabilities via their compliance to various project management maturity models.

The boarders of Projectistan extend across all business sectors and geographical regions, and its values and social mores penetrate into offices, board and conference rooms, even coffee shops. One can recognize the cultural environment of Projectistan by its artefacts, events, rituals, and practices (e.g. Gantt charts, PRINCE2, stakeholder meetings, and the use of language which includes terms such as WBS, scope, critical path, and more recently project governance). To put this in memetic terms, Projectistan is a cultural environment where the frequency or prevalence of project management memes is high, and this prevalence will have a significant influence on the human population who inhabit it.

Individual Behaviour

Experimental findings show that project managers experience projects and the process of managing them in different ways [4]. In an experiment conducted at a PMoz 2010 conference practitioner workshop, project managers were asked to draw what the experience of managing a project is like.
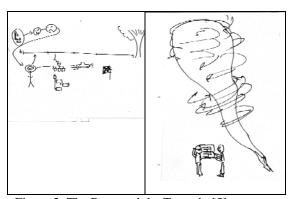

Figure 2: The Race and the Tornado [5]

Figure 2 shows two examples of the varied experiences of the workshop participants. One participant described the experience as a race through the stages of stakeholder frustration, then planning and action through to completing on time and winning the race. Another described it as spending time pointing out to stakeholders that there are bigger problems to worry about than the ones they were focusing on. Coupled with the previous findings, this experiment demonstrates

that the difference between project management experiences and the perceptions of projects, even amongst project managers is significantly varied. It seems that in reality, project managers do not have a one-size-fits-all perception of what a project is, and this has consequences when one considered the limited amount of tools and techniques they have at their disposal.

Despite the various perceptions, there appears to be a remarkable homogeneity amongst the knowledge base of project managers. This could to be caused in part by the influence of project management memes that appear to be driving practitioner behaviour. In the same study Whitty [4] discovered that there appears to be an "Iron Triangle" meme (see Figure 3). When asked "what are the major drivers of projects", practitioners automatically responded by drawing the time-cost-quality triangle, in some cases in the air if not on paper.

Figure 3: Iron Triangle [4]

The Iron Triangle meme is therefore an instruction of how to build a response to the question "what are the major drivers of projects?" It could be said that all students of project management are taught this meme either formally by taking a project management course, or informally by a fellow project manager, work colleague, or by reading a book on project management. A memetic approach would suggest that new project mangers pick up this meme (or catching it to invoke a biological metaphor) from their environment or another project manager who has the meme onboard.

Competitive behaviour

Humans do compete against each other for the role of project manager. Job advertisements for project manager are evidence of this. Those project managers that could be deemed to be successful over time are those who have survived the selection processes in Projectistan. I suggest that project managers are using at least three methods, namely signalling fitness by displaying cues or advertisement for desired traits, mimicry of a desired professional identity, and camouflaging non-complaint behaviour.

Signalling fitness

At a basic level, surviving in Projectistan means keeping ones job as a project manager. One also needs to be selected from amongst other possible candidates for the next project management role

and so on into the future. We know that senior management do have a particular perception of the project manager [6], and that the Gantt chart plays a significant role in creating this perception [7] as it does appear to embody those traits which are highly valued in a capitalist society, namely being organised, in control and productive [4].

Whitty [4] suggest that project managers are using the Gantt chart, a tool once primarily used for scheduling and planning purposes, as one of the cues or advertisements for their fitness for the role of project manager. This is analogous to the peacock's tail which acts as a cue for its reproductive fitness (See Figure 4). In the case of the peacock the feature of the tail is selected by the peahen. In the case of the Gantt chart (the feature being the visual artefact) it appears that both senior management and project stakeholders are selecting it, in some cases for physiological reasons [4]. One could say that the Gantt chart has become 'wired in' to both project manager and senior management and stakeholders.
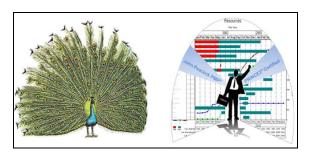

Figure 4: The Peacock & The Manager. Adapted from [8]

Moreover, other artefacts such as PMP® and PRINCE2® certification increase the individual project manager's chances of being selected. These, as well as other project management qualifications and professional affiliations will be displayed on résumés, business cards, office door name plates, and on email signatures.

Mimicry

Projectistan puts pressure on project managers to behave in particular ways in order to survive. One response project managers have adopted is to present the appearance that they are in control even if they are not [9].

Looking the part (even when you're not) can have survival advantages in the corporate world as well as the natural world. In the natural world butterflies have evolved various methods to protect themselves from predators. Some taste good and some taste bad, and predators quickly learn which is which. Those that taste good have developed in a way that is plain, dull coloured, and hard to see,

and they have survived because they blend into the background and camouflage themselves making it look as though they are not there. The bad tasting toxins of the Monarch butterfly (just one example) makes predators sick and their colours serve as a cue to those previously poisoned to stay clear. Generally speaking these types of butterfly have been able to evolve bright colours when predators are infrequent because sexual selection comes in to play and the female preference for particularly stimulating colours and patterns will drive wing colouring. But most interestingly, those who do not taste bad but just happen to develop bright colours benefit too. This deceptive mimicry behaviour is also employed by project managers.

Mimicry is another survival strategy in Projectistan. We know that project managers put on a 'professional' performance for senior management and stakeholders [9] and are commonly put in situations where they are required to construct or protect their professional identity by packaging project information to acquire or support a desired identity [9]. These performance are aimed towards senior management in an attempt to appear confident, in control, and organised when that is not always the case [8].

Camouflage

For a project manager to claim that some of their project successes were down to large amounts of luck would be professional suicide.

Camouflage and mimicry are human distinction and mimicry can be considered a form of camouflage as a Stick Insect camouflages itself by mimicking a stick. However, for this discussion I distinguish camouflage as being the strategy of concealing from senior management the often chaotic and sometimes uncertain nature of project work; and by mimicry I mean the strategy of presenting oneself in a particular manner.

Camouflage in the context of the project manager can present itself by their deliberate disregard for the notion of luck. Consequentially this practice shields or conceals from senior management and project stakeholders the day-to-day messiness of project work by the use of artefacts such as the Gantt chart and orchestrated project briefings.

There is a self-serving bias to the success stories of any project manager. Success stories (read almost any case study) are liberally laced with elements of the *PMBOK® Guide*. The project manager might claim project success because they maintained a visible 'risk register' or they kept a tight control over the 'scope change processes'. But these are more likely to be after-the-fact attributions using the restrictive language of the *PMBOK® Guide*.

However, perhaps a key competence is being able to spot favourable or lucky situations and capitalise on them.

The word 'luck' is conspicuously absent from the primary project management literature. It appears that project managers omit the notion of luck from their stories of project successes, and this further constructs and reinforces the casual links between established project management concepts and practices (memes) and productivity.

Cooperative behaviour

There are survival advantages in numbers. In the wild, flocking, shoaling or herding behaviour increases survival chances against predators, and it can enhance success of foraging for food and finding a mate.

Project managers can find safety in numbers too. This is not because they can reduce their exposure to predators or need to increase their chances of finding a mate, but because joining a large pool of likeminded humans can stabilize their cultural environment. Sharing memes with a large community does dampen down the emergence of new varieties. This works because when project management memes are shuffled around in a large population (i.e. passed from person to person with small copying errors) the tendency for any divergence of concepts, practices or artefacts from the norm would be nipped in the bud. Any novel emergent project management concepts or practices would be swamped out by the established ones.

From a memetic point of view, the project management professional institutions are considered to be social mechanisms that have evolved mainly to spread project management memes [2]. By continually flooding Projectistan with their material and methods of certification and accreditation they keep the habitat of the project manager rather homogeneous.

This homogeneity of project management memes does provide individual project managers with a certain amount of stability and security in that their role remains credible and likely to exist into the future.

Concluding remarks

Professional life for modern project managers is not straightforward. Being a project manager today is much more than just managing projects. Those who have survived in the role have done so by a variety of methods, and it is far too simplistic to say that they have survived because they are good at managing projects.

The paper contends that to survive in the role of project manager, each individual needs to be successful at being selected as project manager of the next bigger and better project. To do this project managers implement a number of strategies to outwit and manipulate the various selective forces. In this paper I have framed some of these strategies under what might be considered to be the evolutionary terms of mimicry and camouflage.

I conclude with a final observation. Just as the peacock diverts significant energy to growing a spectacular tail, so the project manager (because of selection pressure from senior managers and stakeholders) diverts energy (from managing the project) to indulging in practices and building artefacts that have more to do with their survival than it does with the success of the project. Perhaps this situation needs rectifying.

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