

Leading creative projects

- transferring competence across art and business

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Throughout my experience, managing computing and software programmers, it appears that the practice of software programmers resemble more artistic work and non-profit activities than general business work.

Steve Ballmer, CEO Microsoft, 2009

Myths to be challenged

Software programming project management resides in a technical world mostly preoccupied with rational thought and action

Art and theatre production resides in a creative world dominated by play, emotions and values.

Knowledge transfer across software programming projects and theatre productions

Research and theories about project management in software engineering is largely about minimizing risk through the use of planning-, estimating- and control methods and tools

Research and theories about project management in the arts is largely about motivating professionals, encouragement of creativity and leadership style.

Research questions

- How do project managers within software programming and theatre productions lead and manage projects?
- How do these project managers specifically relate to the issues of staffing, risk management and project methods?
- What kind of leadership style do they use?

Method

- Comparative case study approach (Yin, 1984, Eisenhardt, 1989, Gummesson, 2007)
- Selection of projects with unique tasks with high degree of experimentation
- 2 project managers in frontier software programming firm
- 2 theatre art directors (one in regular theatre production and one in experimental theatre production)
- Open and unstructured interviews of 2 hours following a list of themes to be covered

Art manager 1 – theatre instructor

- Project staffing

Staffing extremely important, selection of actors follows intuition and good network.

I cannot be sure that the actors will function, but since I know most of the people I appoint, the probability of succeeding is around 80%. One can also say that when the right people are selected 80% of the job in setting up the play is done.

- Project management methods

Invites the whole theatre production group to a first meeting where artistic idea for the play is presented. He claims he does not use any project management methods, but he actually used a very planned and structured approach for project execution.

Art manager 1 – theater director

- Risk management

Importance of staffing and critical review of composition is important for reducing risk. Two months were spent reading and analyzing the text carefully in order to plan and foresee how each situation or scene will be played and directed. Detailed headings and descriptions of how scenes are staged. This serves as plan for rehearsal.

- Leadership style

Uses intuition, do not give too detailed instructions to the artists, but room to unfold. Authority comes from being well prepared, being inspiring and giving the people feedback, both on positive and negative things. Motivation only a challenge when leading those around 50 years. Success is that the audience has been emotionally moved by the play and that they have understood what the play is about.

Art manager 2 – alternative theater instructor

- Project staffing

We never work with people we don't know, it has to do with the risk thing. Because if we are halfway in the project and discover that we have the wrong person with us, it can easily overturn the whole play.

- Project management methods

Planning is vital for experimental theater productions. A lot of time is also spent on logistics, to plan how to stage the play and all materials and requisites that are needed. They also use Excel and digital calendars that have made everything a lot easier. No resources can be spent on administration because the projects are so limited economically that we have no surplus money.

Art manager 2 – alternative theater director

- Risk management

The economy is seen as introducing the highest risk in her projects.

She does not dare to put together projects without the necessary funding

Planning is a success criteria, the fact that we plan prepare us for inconveniences and secure that we can fulfill our artistic ideas despite unexpected events.

- Leadership style

We do not think that we have a leadership style because we regard it as part of the artistic creation, I laugh when I see documents with my name on as manager. But when thinking about it, I realize I lead and manage a lot.

Software project manager 1 –

- Project staffing

The project manager was hired to do this job with the existing team, and he has not had any influence on staffing issues. It is his challenge to make this team work well together and deliver.

- Project management methods

The project manager is very familiar with all software management methods - which they follow. The team gathers monthly to report, discuss and evaluate progress so far – and adjust plans accordingly. Jobs are delegated according to preferences. He compare this kind of software development to jazz jamming, you are supposed to be creative and innovative within a certain framework.

Software project manager1 –

- Risk management

Risk factors are difficult technicalities. And these challenges are what the team enjoys and is motivated by. He identifies these early, and high risk tasks are always on top of the “to do” list. In this kind of project there is really only one big risk; not being able develop the product. There are many difficult issues to be solved. However, he claims there are no stress or anxiety.

- Leadership style

The company has a flat and informal culture and they prefer open team-based office solution. There are few conflicts and no turnover. The team has lots of discussions, but usually agrees upon how to solve things and proceed. Motivation is no issue as the whole team is dedicated and focused on creating a top product. The project manager is respected because of his competence and this gives him authority as leader of the team. The tone is friendly with lots of funny comments.

I am more of a coordinator than a boss.

Software project manager 2 –

- Project staffing

I want a certain mindset – people that are consistent.

He is looking for the right personalities, staff that are self-motivated and self-driven.

I want people that know who they are.

- Project management methods

Iterative project management is well established in the company. They are consistently structured and methodological. This seems to be very integrated in the culture and was not considered an issue in the interview.

Software project manager2 –

- Risk management

He expresses a relaxed attitude to risk. He was previously a sportsman, and claims that the more you accept the possibility of failure – the easier it is to succeed – as you are less stressed and tense.

- Leadership style

He cares about his people, he is “no dictator”, but considers himself a coach.

I want to train them in my mindset.....and explain the reasons for doing things.

If you can coach people to think like you, then you have succeeded.

To manage project at this level you must be strong and learn to speak your mind and sometimes point out a new direction.

He believes humor and direct feedback is a vital part of their culture. To be respected as an authority and leader you must have technical competence.

Final comments

- Strong focus on quality of end product for both groups
- Both groups consider staffing and planning as crucial for success
- Risk handling and leadership style deviated to some degree
- Preliminary pilot study – future research required
- We welcome comments and ideas for further study