"On time and on budget": Harnessing creativity in large scale projects

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Abstract

Keeping large scale projects "on time and on budget" is no trivial accomplishment, especially when they rely on creative contributions from multiple individuals and groups that cannot be precisely timed. Simultaneously delivering on all of these aspects requires a flexible and nuanced approach to controls that builds on the discipline instilled in professional practice. We substantiate this insight with 82-day ethnography of a dramatic television series production as it unfolded in real-time. Our analyses reveal three distinct practices enacted by project members to (re) balance creativity within the parameters of the project: 1) analogically linking controls with creative tasks; 2) (in)formally attuning creative tasks to controls as the project unfolds; and 3) (re)allocating scarce resources to realize creative aspirations of the project. Taken together, these practices organically but predictably (re)balance creativity and control in large scale projects.
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1. Introduction

Within the project management literature, creativity has long been seen as an essential ingredient in new product development processes (Sundstrom and Zika-Victorsson, 2009). In many projects, the need for creativity is confined to the conception and the design stage; however, in other types of projects creativity is required from conception to completion (Adler and Chen, 2011; Simon, 2005). These large-scale creative collaborations (LSCCs) include projects such as software development, new drug formulations, airline design, and film and television production. The sheer size and complexity of these projects require formal controls to ensure that the creative inputs emerging from different groups seamlessly cohere in the final product (Adler and Chen, 2011). Further, since the paths to goal on these projects cannot be specified in advance (Perlow et al., 2004), they call for different patterns of managerial attention (Dougherty, 2008).

Most projects are deadline-driven and LSCCs are no exception. However, deadlines present an additional challenge for LSCCs because they rely on the emergence of creative insights which cannot be precisely timed (Dougherty, 2008). Yet clear and unambiguous deadlines can also inspire some — but not all — forms of creativity (Gersick, 1995). Further, in LSCCs deadlines and milestones provide a common referent that allows project members to collaborate and coordinate their activities (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Gersick, 1988, 1999). Since the quality of the final product is partially dependent on the relations and interactions of the different specialties involved in the project, control mechanisms must allow for interactive problem solving and experimentation (Lindqvist et al., 1998).

Although there can be many facets to the 'dark side' of creativity, one of the ways it can manifest in LSCCs is through

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multiple and divergent interpretations of specific goals and objectives. These can lead to creative excess (MacKay and McKiernan, 2010) that contributes to project delays. Cost overruns are also likely[2] as a change in one sub-component design triggers a cascade of changes required in the other interdependent parts (Nightingale and Brady, 2011). Because creative interpretations are not inherently right or wrong — just different — the management challenge is to contain these interpretations within a unifying vision in order to deliver the project on time and on budget while simultaneously achieving the creative goals of the project.

Taken together, the preceding paragraphs inform our research question: how do project teams deliver the creative objectives of the project within the parameters of the schedule and the budget? To guide our exploration of the phenomenon in a dramatic television series production, we returned to a more traditional definition of creativity that is tied to artistic practice (Gahan et al., 2007). Our findings show that the project team relied on three distinct practices to realize the creative aims of the project while delivering it on time and on budget. Two of these were preparatory practices — analogies and attunement — that paved the way for the continuous (re)allocation of resources (time and money). These practices built on the organic controls that were inherent in the different artistic practices required on the project.

2. Theory

2.1. Creativity in large-scale collaborative projects

The conceptualization of creativity as an important antecedent to innovation in the project management literature mirrors the broader organizational literature (e.g. Amabile, 1996). Organizational researchers have developed a multiple theoretical perspectives of how creativity unfolds at the individual, group, and organizational levels (e.g. Csikszentmihayli, 1996; Drazin et al., 1999; Woodman et al., 1993). Researchers of individual creativity, largely informed by social psychology, have identified specific ways to enhance creativity in the workplace through supportive leadership styles (Amabile et al., 2004), constructive feedback (Zhou, 2008), and sufficient autonomy in day-to-day activities (Amabile et al., 1996). From a more macro-level perspective, creativity requires a systemizing process that increases the number of new ideas generated (Hargadon and Sutton, 2000). Creativity has also been linked to the ability to attain and sustain competitive advantage (e.g. Lampel et al., 2000), particularly in high-velocity environments where technical knowledge is necessary to sustain continuous innovation.

However, the implicit assumption common to both the micro and macro level views of creativity in the workplace that 'more is better' precludes an explanation of the need to place limits on creativity. There are real risks and dangers of unbridled creativity, especially in LSCCs where the contributions of multiple constituents, often geographically disbursed, must come together

as a unified whole within the final product (Adler and Chen, 2011). Changes in one component of the project will trigger the need for changes in all of the interdependent parts (Nightingale and Brady, 2011).

Critics of the 'more is better' approach to creativity in organizational research point out that the emphasis on problem solving masks the real needs of creative people and processes (Bilton, 2007). Further, much of our understanding of individual creativity comes from laboratory-based studies where creative tasks are presented as discrete challenges removed from the complexity and dynamism encountered in the real world (Adler and Chen, 2011). Some observers advocate a return to the origins of the concept, which is rooted in the visual and creative arts where it is associated with artistic practices in whatever form they may take (Gahan et al., 2007; Townley and Beech, 2010). From this perspective, creativity is viewed as a set of imaginative practices that are associated with the formation and expression of an idea in some artistic form (Gahan et al., 2007). These practices involve decisions on how to edit, arrange and present material within the established traditions of a particular craft, while simultaneously testing canonical boundaries (Townley and Beech, 2010). Unfortunately, our romanticized notion of the artist is blind to the discipline inherent in creative practice and the social nature of the processes involved in its production (Wolff, 1980).

Our focus on artistic creativity is not intended to privilege it over other forms of creativity, but to resurrect the origins of the concept. In doing so, we highlight the need for a deeper understanding of an often contested, and certainly complex concept. Artistic work not only relies on the discipline inherent in a specific craft (Adler, 2006; Townley and Beech, 2010), it also has many parallels with other production processes (Wolff, 1980). The artist is not along in the production of the work but integrated into a field of intermediaries and consumers (Bourdieu, 1993). Further, all forms of creativity require a combination of the novel and the familiar, which is achieved through an in-depth understanding of the rules in order to break new ground (Csiskzentmihayli, 1996; Townley and Beech, 2010).

The aim of this paper is to reveal what project management, and LSCCs more specifically, can learn from managing projects with an artistic core (Townley et al., 2009). In these projects, the final product emerges through the interactions of the artist(s), audiences, and the other individuals involved in its production (Gahan et al., 2007). Given the non-utilitarian and experiential nature of the product, the audience is the ultimate arbiter of project success (Lampel et al., 2000). Many new technology products also contain an experiential dimension and the success (or failure) of these NPD projects is ultimately defined by the consumers who adopt (or ignore) these products in the marketplace.

2.2. The inherent tensions between creativity and control

The importance of controls has been identified as one of the key success factors in project management, while the lack of adequate controls is seen as a key reason for failure (Nienemen and Lehtonen, 2008). Formal control mechanisms are the information-

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[2] Delays and overruns can also be caused by multiple factors apart from this.