

# **A Model of Process Oriented Project Management Education**

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## **Abstract**

Project management education has never been more popular than today. A vast offer of well-designed courses and programs exists, whose quality is demonstrated by the increasing number of knowledgeable, often PMP certified, project managers.

Still, it's very difficult to observe good project management in action: understanding and appreciating concepts and methods doesn't seem to go hand in hand with successfully managing projects.

The paper will argue that, to achieve the latter target, it is necessary to rethink the model of project management education. The introduction of tools and techniques, in particular, should be aimed at facilitating the comprehension of the character that the project manager is expected to play in organizations.

Underlining this thesis is the belief that key to become a successful project manager is a conscious decision to play this challenging role.

## **The limits of traditional management training**

I became a project management trainer after having worked for twenty years in projects.

Quite understandably, I tried to embody a model of instructor borrowed from the best trainers I had met through the attendance of corporate programs and from the speakers that most engaged me at professional conferences.

I was essentially going mainstream: indeed 'training and education of managers or other professional groups has become quite a distinct genre, characterised by short modules on well defined subjects, small class sizes, high level of trainer input, interaction and participation, and lots of exercises, examples and project work. The emphasis is on practical techniques, succinct models and easy to apply prescriptions. In many ways, management development is more akin to being taught at nursery school than to university education' (Pellegrinelli, 2002).

The method chosen to assess my trainer's competence was also in line with general industry trends: I asked attendees to fill evaluation questionnaires which were demonstrating that, with the passing of time, I was improving in the areas of overall class appreciation, presentation skills and knowledge acquired.

I was, like the vast majority of trainers, enrolled in the rows of the 'edutainment' business.

But a sudden and deep change of perspective was waiting for me in the clothes of one of my clients, a senior manager who, during a casual conversation, made an apparently ingenuous comment: 'I appreciate that you teach project management to my people who has never been exposed to the subject before, but I can't understand what you can teach to the managers of project oriented companies, who has been attending these kind of training for many years'. My answer was prompt and instinctive: 'Well, one thing is to have methodologies and tools in place, and a completely different thing is to apply them: my job is precisely that of enabling participants to put in practice organizational knowledge'.

I don't know yet where that answer came from, but I immediately loved it. Consequently, I began to ponder if there was any way of proving if the attendance to my courses was really making a difference in the life of participants. To verify this point I developed the habit of sending, a few weeks after the end of a class, an e-mail asking the attendees if, as a result of the training, they experienced some changes in their behaviours.

The results of the first samples were disappointing: on an average class of around 15 participants only three to five answered. I interpreted the fact that the majority of the attendees didn't bother to answer as an indicator of no noticeable change. Moreover, some of the people who provided the feedback were reporting that, even if they had tried to apply the ideas presented in the class, the pressures coming from the company's organization forced them to revert to old style behaviours.

The latter comment is particularly interesting because it is in relationship with a typical complaint I receive when I conduct a class: ‘Why don’t you teach these concepts to our bosses?’ The question, which challenges a conservative corporate culture, is also very revealing of how the participants often project ‘the blame for any problems away from themselves and onto what they [say are] unclear goals, insensitive and unfair leaders, and stupid clients’ (Argyris, 1991).

### **The interpretive approach to competence at work**

However, no matter how low the percentage, after each class I always received a few positive feedbacks. Most of the time these answers contained descriptions of behaviours which consequences were often surprising for the participants themselves.

The following is an example of a feedback, which describes some changes of behaviour:

Yes, I did change.

The first thing I did was to develop a detailed WBS for a project which I have just started. I also thoroughly documented a Project Requirement Document (we call it a Project Management Plan).

The WBS was very useful for defining the project. After I had done my project estimates I gave them to my Account Director who thought my estimates were too high. I went through the PMP and when we go to the WBS diagram he said wow! As my estimates seemed too high, I went through each deliverable and asked what I should delete and he said nothing! So I was able to defend my estimates and the WBS provided a good graphic picture of the project scope.

What is significant in this particular situation is not the fact that the individual mastered the use of some tools and techniques (in this particular case the participant was already knowledgeable and took the course only as a refresher). In fact the level of competence observable in this particular account needs a broader definition, which embraces ‘the “right” combination of *knowledge*, *performance*, and *personal* competence’ (PMI, 2002).

Indeed, what is really worthy of attention is the attitude shown by the participant, in particular his willingness to stand in front of the Account Director in order to defend a realistic project plan. In fact the attendee was confident in his ability to effectively play the project manager role.

This way of explaining the performance of the participant is consistent with the interpretive approach to competence at work, which argues that *competence consists in nothing more than the conceptual representation of the work* (i.e. the interiorised role).

In this perspective, it is not the possess of a specific set of attributes (i.e. knowledge, skills, abilities, personal traits, work procedures) that determines competence but, instead, ‘it is the workers’ ways of conceiving work that make up, form, and organize their knowledge and skills into distinctive competence in performing their work’ (Sandberg, 2000).

The interpretive approach postulates that, within an organisation, there are only a limited number of conceptual models of the role (between 2 and 6), which are hierarchically organized, with top levels including the representations of the lower levels.

Even if all the individuals can understand the different roles, each of them is really able to behave only in accordance with the corresponding interiorised model. Moreover, managers behaving accordingly to a lower level role will describe higher-level roles by using the frame of reference typical of their conceptual model.

A simple example of a hierarchical organization of roles is provided by the work I did with a group of post graduate students enrolled in a master in project management.

Following up from a discussion about a newspaper article that described a troubled project, I asked the students to list activities that the project manager could have performed in order to avoid failure.

After that, we used group dynamics techniques to collect data and cluster them.

The resulting groups of activities described three different concepts of the project manager role, representing increasing level of competence:

- manage (ability to efficiently solve problems when they manifest themselves);
- plan (organize work to prevent problems and consequently be able to manage efficiently);
- understand (appreciate stakeholders' expectations, to plan correctly and to manage efficiently).

Due to their limited work experience, most of the students were thinking and acting in accordance with the 'manage' representation of the role (lowest level) and a few of them were positioned at the 'plan' conceptual description (intermediate level).

It is worth noticing that, independently by the level of their interiorised representation of the role, all of them had no difficulties in appreciating and describing the characteristics of the 'understand' role (higher level).

### **The Project Manager's Actors studio**

Once demonstrated the unsatisfactory outcome of traditional training programmes, the problem becomes that of designing new development programs that enable participants to make a mental leap towards a higher level of competence.

In fact 'seeing changing conceptions of work as the most fundamental form of developing competence has major implications for designing and conducting training and development activities [...] transferring attributes may encourage less desirable conceptions of work, through simply reinforcing those ways of conceiving of the work in question' (Sandberg, 2000, p.22).

The approach described below aims at shifting the focus of project management education from content (i.e. concepts, tools and techniques) to process (i.e. behaviours).

The metaphor I've chosen to describe the method is an 'actors studio', where project managers can study and rehearse their character before playing it on the business' scene.

The Actors Studio was the first western school that applied the work and theories of Costantin Stanislavski, who argued that the actor should learn to think and to live like the character he has to play, until the life of the latter will overlap to the actor's personal life.

The model proposed aims at achieving two main goals:

- to increase the awareness of the different roles;
- to interiorise the most appropriate role (depending on the level of competence already possessed) so that it can be played in a natural way.

The second objective is the most difficult to achieve because, even when they are aware of the role they should play, 'people consistently act inconsistently, unaware of the contradictions between [...] the way they think they are acting and the way they really act' (Argyris, 1991)

At this stage, the model of process oriented project management education I'm experimenting with includes three components:

#### **Role awareness workshop**

This is a one day event whose objectives are those of introducing the interpretive approach and of identifying which conceptions of the role are present in the participant's group and how they are hierarchically organized.

The workshop, which uses group dynamics techniques to identify competency clusters, provides a map of competencies which can constitute the basis for developing process oriented courses tailored to the different needs of the participants.

In order to analyse the rhetoric used to describe the different conceptual models, participants are also engaged in a presentation of the characteristics of good and bad project managers. The comparative analysis of the different descriptions of the roles is used as a basis for establishing the hierarchy of role levels (Partington, 2005).

### **Process oriented courses**

The courses, whose duration (usually 3 to 5 days) and agenda vary according to the specific kind of knowledge areas addressed, are partly organized as traditional management classes, with short lectures and practical exercises (necessary to teach tools and techniques) and partly as experiential learning events, based on role plays and circles of discussions (indispensable to interiorise the proposed role).

In this approach the experience of the participants is acknowledged and the trainer act as a facilitator whose aim is that of helping attendees 'to make the shift from relative unreality to relative reality. Debriefed simulations are new scripts, giving participants the confidence and route map to initiate tangible actions once back in the workplace' (Pellegrinelli, 2002).

### **Follow up sessions**

These are one day facilitated workshops, repeated periodically with decreasing frequency, conducted as circle of discussions. Participants present in turn the difficulties they had experienced in applying the concepts and techniques learned in the process oriented courses.

During the sessions, it is very common to observe the emergence of a few patterns of problematic behaviours, usually belonging to the cluster of soft skills that are needed in order to play the project manager's role (e.g. communication, assertiveness, negotiation).

Sharing the experience with other peers, enable participants to recognize how the project manager roles, previously identified through the awareness workshop, really exist and drive their behaviours.

## **The state of the art**

Even if still in an evolving stage, the process oriented model of project management education looks promising: I still send e-mail asking for feedback and the number of positive answers is increasing.

In particular there is a new type of answer that can be labelled 'almost yes', where participants describe tentative behaviours, applied to situations perceived as low risk, in order to see how would be the life in the clothes of a different, higher level, character.

The model is still in its early infancy and it will need time and experience to become mature and reliable. In the meanwhile I've started to ponder on the nature of my conceptual representation of the consultant role.

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