

Prepared Questions and Answers from the Interview with David Schmaltz, author The Blind Men and the Elephant, Mastering Project Work, January 22, 2004

In the preface (p. x), you say, "(P)rojects rarely meet their objectives. Our methods for making successful projects seem to take the soul out of them." Yet, in an earlier p. ix you stated, "(Y)ou probably already know most of what you need to know to create better projects." So why are we not succeeding?

We don't always act on what we know. Neither knowing *how* nor knowing *what* addresses the issue of knowing *when*, and one without the others can't create even half a response. Knowing *when* often requires a deep sensitivity to many intangible elements. We can't refer to a cookbook to tell us when it's time to make a cherry fudge cake, nor can we refer to it to tell us when and to whom to serve it. Because of this, if we rely on the cookbook's directions, we're likely to know all about what constitutes a cherry fudge cake, and even how to make one, without ever discovering how to meaningfully deploy one in the world.

Our methods are actually means for creating and enhancing relationships, but we often employ them as replacements for relationships. We can, for instance, populate a project with equivalent head counts or with attention to individual aspirations. The method does not require that we involve ourselves fully in its deployment, though we are usually better off when we do.

I believe that we already know most of this stuff, but have stored this knowledge in places that are difficult to access in moments of extremity, when they might really make a difference. This is like storing life jackets under lock and key. We might reasonably do this so they won't get stolen. Some of our most fully human capabilities get similarly stored away because the organizational context within which we work seems threatening to us. We place ourselves in considerable peril to keep ourselves safe. Then we get to wrestle with the paradox we've constructed for all of the best reasons whenever the water starts rising.

The book serves as a reminder to me, and hopefully to others, of the real power and authority I've always had and have so often forgotten I have. Believe me, I need the reminder.

You have an engaging way of presenting seemingly contradictory distinctions. My favorite is "hasten slowly." On p. 28 you say, "(W)ithout an explicit purpose, project work tends to shift from raging enthusiasm to utter meaninglessness...Responding to an urgency by hastening creates the key failure mode for projects." Say more about the failure mode and what hasten slowly might look like.

When it comes to project work, I naturally employ a Napoleonic perspective, they're guilty until proven innocent. That is, I believe projects are naturally much more likely to fail than succeed, until proven otherwise. In this culture, we seem to have the opposite focus, we initiate projects with a 'can do!' attitude, as if success were a foregone conclusion unless someone screws up something. This 'can do!' attitude leads us to assume away much of the information available to us that could help ensure success. I could mention Operation Iraqi Freedom here, but I won't.

The elements we most often overlook when hastening fall into three broad categories: Where am I?, What's the nature of this project? and What's the nature of the sustaining organization? We rush right past these questions, eyes focused upon the alluring prize, even though the answers are usually prominently emblazoned on everyone's tee shirt from before the start. For the project community, some conversation about where we are individually and together sets an important contextual understanding. For the community to consider the nature of and the historical patterns around such efforts sets a deeper, shared contextual comprehension, useful in designing this project's responses to eternal dilemmas. For the community to reflect on its own nature, its past as well as its aspirations for the future, creates cultural awareness. Since culture can be defined as what we do when we don't think we're doing anything, transforming this tacit knowledge into more explicit form creates a more solid foundation upon which to construct and guide the effort.

Of course we always learn about these elements as the project unfolds, usually at the least convenient times. I advocate purposefully inconveniencing the project at the beginning to avoid having to address these questions at less convenient times.

I sometimes do a simple exercise at the start of my workshops. I ask the participants to bring a project into the workshop with them. Then, without any elucidation, I ask each to spend five minutes planning their project. Almost no one ever asks what I mean by planning, and virtually no one engages in a conversation with the person sitting next to them, even when they are working on the same effort. In a group of twenty, I routinely find ten or fifteen different starting places chosen for this exercise. One starts by identifying stakeholders while another lists milestones. Another starts defining high-level requirements while another focuses upon defining the objective. The point of the exercise is not to play some gotcha game with the group, but to help them reflect on how they went about choosing their starting place. What told them where to start? Some say that they started where they always start, and this is an example of engrained habit. Others report that they started someplace different than they started last time because it didn't work out so well then. This is an example of learning what didn't work, and searching for a better response. Some start where the

methodology told them to start. I receive about as many explanations for why people started where they started as I get starting places. The exercise points out that their response to my direction is a deeply human one. Given an objective, we start moving toward it with more haste than reflection, even when reflection would better focus our response. The haste we employ is often wasted.

In the real world, projects tend to have an essential milling around period at the beginning. This is a period before meaningful progress can be made, though we often attempt to plan and attempt to make other meaningful progress during this time, anyway, to meet schedule obligations and to satisfy that 'can do!' attitude welling up inside ourselves. In this culture we mistake meaningful milling around for a lack of meaningful progress, and this mistake drives us crazy to get moving, to hasten. We sometimes employ process models to slow us down, but few of these encourage the sort of open milling around and quiet reflection from which emerges deep understanding of the context within we will be working as the project unfolds. When we just get going, without this careless-seeming consideration, we find that we have to revisit fundamental issues, often more than once, as the messages on the tee shirts slowly come into our eyes focused so intently upon the prize at the end.

What does the essential milling around period look like? It looks like a mess! I employ some simple focusing tools to challenge me and my budding community with necessary questions, under the three questions I listed above: Where am I? What's the nature of this project? and What's the nature of the sustaining organization? I've never seen a project idea emerge unchanged from these considerations. They serve the purpose of making tacit understanding explicit, and so serve to rapidly evolve the originating idea into a more workable form. Perhaps more importantly, they serve to initiate deeper and more robust relationships among the community members. Of course the milling around is a difficult time for the project's sponsors, since their beautiful bright idea will necessarily lose some candle power in this process, and those who struggle to contain their 'can do-ness' strain under this bit. Still, the shared understanding emerging from the essential milling around period always saves the most effort, because it helps the community avoid doing what they, the project, or the organization were never really prepared to do in the first place.

So, rather than hastening quickly at the beginning, or even hastening slowly at the beginning, I suggest respecting the essential milling around period, punctuated with a healthy dose of Napoleonic skepticism. If I can't disappoint anyone at the beginning (especially myself), I'm unlikely to delight anyone at the end (including myself).

You encourage people to be selfish. (my word) You say, "How will you use this assignment for satisfying yourself? Every project assignment offers both obligation and opportunity. We usually focus so intently upon the obligation that we miss the opportunity to use the assignment as a medium for pursuing what we truly want for ourselves." Why is this so important to the success of the overall project. And in what ways can people go about making it a practice on their project to ask, "What do you want?"

This idea springs from a fundamental paradox of all work. In this culture, we have deeply ingrained rules and beliefs about how we should respond to obligations. This often appears as a curious willingness to sacrifice ourselves to fulfill obligations. My question is, If you sacrifice yourself for the effort, who will be left to fulfill the obligation? And perhaps more importantly, Who will be left to fulfill the next one, and the one after that?

None of us are infinite resources. Our energy and inspiration comes from somewhere, and it seems to me that the results I produce when I'm passionately engaged is of a higher quality than they are when I'm sacrificing myself. It seems simply rapacious and self-destructive to use up a renewable resource, especially one, like myself, which is so easily renewed. Is it this way for you, too?

I can't resolve the idea that self sacrifice is good for a project, especially when the opportunities for making any work into a juicy, passionate pursuit seem abundant. We are free to choose any of an unimaginable array of alternative purposes, none of which need conflict with fulfilling our obligations. I think we each have the continuing opportunity to identify our own project within each project assignment, and to forego these opportunities seems only to constrain our best work. I'd go one step further, and suggest that it's an unethical choice to sacrifice yourself. We have the ethical responsibility to preserve our own productive capacity.

There are three elements influencing all work, the self, others, and the context. The other and the context have powerful influence over the quality and quantity of results. And we often focus so intently upon these distractions that we forget, without our selves, there can be no results. I'm not arguing that self should be anything but balanced with the other two aspects of work, but because self is so often ignored as a meaningful consideration, it sounds 'selfish' when I suggest it. I argue that we should be self-ish as well as other-ish and context-ist, or we aren't fully capable of producing our most meaningful and our best results. In the end, balancing self-ishness benefits the project as well as the self.

We call listening the master skill of the leader. You warn people that they may not be listened to the way they intend. (Maybe we are never listened to the way we intend.) You indicate that our metaphors are a usual culprit in the mis-listening

we create, urging that we monitor our metaphors (p. 51). What do you see that project managers can be doing to monitor their metaphors on their projects?

The first great skill of any leader is to learn to listen to themselves. I received a message from the leader of a political campaign yesterday, saying that now that the Iowa caucuses are complete, it's time for the candidate to take off the gloves and come out fighting. I sent an immediate response, questioning the metaphor. It seemed to me that the difficulty was exactly that the candidate had chosen to put on the gloves in the first place, taking the bait and coming out fighting in boxing gloves. The boxing gloves disabled his ability to shake hands, preparing him only for fights. Taking off the gloves to prepare for fighting suggested to me that the campaign was intending to engage in bare-knuckle boxing, which would hurt the country more than the candidate or his opponents, but which would certainly hurt the candidate, too. I questioned the necessity of engaging in a fight to win. Couldn't the candidate consider some potentially co-opting alternatives, which might prevent the need for engaging in endless battles.?

I often hear war metaphors bantered about by project managers. These can unconsciously set a context for wholly unintended responses. Enemies emerge. Scorched earth policies and brutal behaviors are subtly justified, and the community quietly goes to hell.

The meaning of any message comes from the response to that message. Intention doesn't enter into the communication, except in the experience of the separate individuals involved. Like a telephone transmitting, messages are sent and received, but the meanings interpreting them never travel beyond either the sender or the receiver. This makes communication as intended seem less likely than we assume.

A project manager, actually anyone, can engage in what's called meta-communication, literally, communication about the communication whenever the response differs from what was intended by the sender. Rather than assume the receiver is an idiot, I counsel making the most generous possible interpretation of the curious behaviors emerging around you. Generosity enables meta-communication, because with it, idiocy becomes mystery, and it's easier to interact with a mystery than an idiot. The term I use to describe this technique is, "When the words and the music don't match, ask." Don't ask them to explain why they didn't get the message you intended them to receive, but ask what message they received.

As Yogi Berra said, you can learn a lot by watching. If you want to know the 'real' meaning of your metaphors, look at the behaviors they elicit. When mystified, slow down and engage in a conversation about the conversation. I often start these with some variant on the statement, "Does

it feel as lousy communicating with me as if feels for me to communicate with you?" This allows me to take full responsibility for my own experience, and opens up the conversation about the conversation without anyone feeling accused or blamed.

"Everyone looks like a snake to a snake hunter...For those who expect to see only snakes, the world has to be a dangerous place," (p. 60). We don't want to be naiive expecting to see only the trust-worthy people. What might we do so we don't miss the few snakes among the otherwise community of trust-worthy people?

And why wouldn't we want to be a little naive? Perhaps the most powerful thing anyone can do is learn to accept that there's little you can do to identify real snakes at first. You will get bitten occasionally, but these bites are rarely fatal. They do provide the beneficial side effect of giving you useful information, who's a snake and who's not. In this way, snake bites inoculate you against future snake bites if you can learn from the experience.

I've learned to adopt the belief that there's no such thing as non-representative behavior. I often have to struggle with my aspirations for a snake, someone that I didn't initially characterize as a threat, who later bit me. I'm really quite skilled at explaining away that first bite as somehow being unrepresentative of the snake, which sets me up for a second, third, and fourth bite.

The trust-worthy people will prove worthy of your trust. The untrustworthy ones won't. If you don't trust first, you won't discover whether they are trustworthy or not. This is a continuing challenge. You may choose what I characterize as a sorry kind of safety, and this sometimes seems necessary. If I believe that I will not survive a snake bite, it might be prudent to withhold my trust. This omission isn't free, though, because it imposes a security cost on the effort.

I think that trust is something we develop only with maturity. Naivete is the default of the innocent, while trust is the choice of the more mature. We learn to trust our world as we mature, or we don't. I think of those who have not learned to trust as being less mature, though they might just live in continuing real danger. The difference between my most paranoid and my healthiest responses seems to be that I've learned to trust myself to deal with the consequences of my own actions. At a very deep level, Trusting anyone else is first about trusting my own ability to accept the consequences of my actions, though I sometimes project my fears onto others, thinking that my lack of trust is all about the other or the context, even though they have not shown themselves to be untrustworthy. The real question seems to be, Am I worthy of my own trust? If I cannot trust

myself, I'm unlikely to find the reason to trust anyone else. In this context, not extending trust seems naive and immature.

I try to extend my trust first. I try to avoid shrinking from this responsibility. When I can find the courage which some will call naivete, I am usually rewarded for my bravery.

My favorite line in the whole book is (p. 79), "There is no such thing as a project." C'mon, David, of course there's a project. The project keeps us awake at night. Please tell us what you mean and how we could be looking at the work we're doing.

There's a project, but not a thing.

Our language fails to properly distinguish between things that are things and things that are clearly not things at all. The old song lyric asks, "What is this thing called love?" The only sane answer seems to be, love ain't a thing.

Projects belong to the class of words called "nominalized verbs." We treat these words like nouns, but they behave more like verbs. The cognitively more correct term for a project would be "a projecting," but this sounds silly to our ears.

The test for thingness, as I suggest in the book, is a simple wheelbarrow. If something can be physically placed into a wheelbarrow, it passes the thingness test. If it cannot be so physically located, it enters the class of thingless things, concepts that cannot be influenced by physical means. This is an important distinction because if projects were things, we might have some rational, objective means for mediating our different perspectives about them. We can physically go meta to a thing, assuming higher ground and resolve differences from a detached perspective. Not so with not-thing things.

My wife, Amy, to whom I dedicated the book, refers to projects as group conjuring. The thing that we experience together is a product of our collective imagining, and not a physical thing. We truly are projecting. This is a useful perspective, because we can shift this phantom more or less at will. It's also a burden though, because the phantom can shift seemingly on its own accord. Either way, we must hold this "thing" in our minds to hold it.

Of course, we produce artifacts, evidence of various aspects of our projects. The plan. The schedule. The requirements document. But none of these are the project. They can be useful aids to our projecting or they can encumber it. Each are evidence of a project's presence, but none are THE project. We can look at the originating aspiration, the confining

constraints, the guiding regulators, the alluring target, and the lasting legacy without ever catching a glimpse of the project itself.

All sorts of craziness can result from treating projects like things. We finally lose our authority over our relationship with them when we promote them to thing status. I use the phrase, "There's no such thing as a project," to help keep me out of the trance state that takes over my rational mind whenever I start relating to 'no thing' as if it were a thing. In a very real sense, the Blind Men metaphor breaks down here. They had an elephant. Project people are not so fortunate. There is no elephant there, though there is the experience of the many pieces of it.

Finally, I'd suggest that it's not the project keeping you up at night, but you keeping yourself up at night. I get this image of a hairy phantom haunting your bedroom, but I know there's no phantom there. Your conjuring disturbs your sleep. Your projecting when you intended to be sleeping. If the project were a thing, you might not feel you had to consider it so continually that you couldn't sleep.

Keeping the context of a project alive for the participants is one necessary action of a project leader. You go further saying (p. 87), "If you're not involved in the organizing, you will never fully comprehend the intended organizing principle." Please tell us why that is so important. And share some ways leaders can involve others in organizing on their projects.

Creating the context for the effort is usually more important than keeping the context alive, though this critical step is often overlooked. Properly created, the context takes on a life of its own, relieving the PM of the burden of continually refreshing common understanding. Unfortunately (or, perhaps fortunately) creating context is a deeply personal experience for each participant. We cannot experience by being told about a context any more than we can visit Rome by seeing a travelogue.

One of the common mistakes PMs make is to organize their project as a collection of out-of-context subcontractors. The reasoning behind this decision seems to be that by isolating each subcontracting group from the overall, the resulting organization is easier to manage and control. It's certainly tidier and apparently more efficient to plan for others and then hand out assignments. This strategy is equivalent to the blind men simply agreeing not to extend their understanding beyond their own physical experience. Of course, projects, like elephants, are not so easily compartmentalized.

Our mental models of the project guide our engagement with the effort more than our physical plans do. There are quite modest limits to what any plan can explain, and we encounter the travelogue dilemma when we choose to explain rather than directly experience.

Those doing the work must plan the work, but this isn't enough. Those doing the work must plan the work together. Understand that they will do this, no matter how finished the presented plan might be. They have to find their own place within the map, and discover how that place relates to other's places. This work often encumbers progress when not done explicitly at the beginning- and at key points throughout the effort. On very large projects, this can be a significant effort, especially since this work must come at a time before the participants have jelled into anything like a community. But, you see, this exercise is the medium by which community gets created. It's not the product of the planning that's important, but the planning itself. If you look at the effort as one intended to produce a plan, it will appear hopelessly wasteful. The apparent inefficiency of the effort can be disconcerting, though it can be facilitated to make the experience more tolerable. The considering which of the thousand ways a project might be organized creates the connections, not just between the tasks, but between the people doing those tasks. It's possible to engage even very large groups in ways that allow each to find their own place within the community, even when employing a prescriptive method. This is an easily facilitated activity, often avoided because it looks like it will just be a mess or because we think we can look at the resulting picture and understand it, or just because we don't know how to facilitate a large, contentious group in coming to one mind, or, because we don't want to open up and deal with the inevitable can of worms that any such gathering creates.

We invisibly pay the price for these decisions over the life of the effort, though we will likely not find the source of the overhead, or even recognize it as such.

People are at the center of all projects. The big drive from PMI in the last few years has been on process. You say (p. 125), "Process can always replace relationship. Process extended to theologic adherence easily displaces our natural abilities to relate to each other." How can we incorporate and take advantage of what process offers without the negative consequences to relationships?

First, about PMI. PMI's process focus is understandable. What else could they focus on and maintain something as absurd as a Book of Knowledge? Or certify by exam? They have to focus upon the narrow, measurable elements of definable process, even though these elements ignore the spirit and professional judgment required to successfully guide or participate in projects. They are ethically neutral, though they might embody the shadows of an ethic. Each professional employing a process has the ethical responsibility to inject their own good judgment into their use.

We get to choose whether we use process to replace or enhance relationships. There's no requirement to leave out relationships when employing processes, but they do seem to distract us in that direction because they don't insist that we include relationships. Processes are disembodied directions. They represent the delusion that one could complete work without relationships or that relationships simply happen, when we all know this isn't true. This isn't the process or the process promoter's fault. We omit this spark ourselves.

We can use processes as opportunities to exercise our own good judgment, and we have the ethical responsibility as professionals to do just that. When we need approvals signed off, do we ask for the signature or seek the approval? The signature is supposed to represent something. It's just a placeholder for a deeper, less definable element which can only be realized through relationship. We can meet a milestone, piling up all of the artifacts without ever meeting the intention of the milestone, the understanding that the milestone was intended to represent.

Process-heavy organizations sometimes take on the functioning of a well-oiled machine, running over the opportunities for creating relationships. The plan says, so we forego the opportunity to interact in ways that will enhance the experience and the product. We are too good at behaving like machines, blaming the plan or the strategy for our own usually innocent oversight. We become disembodies selves, then, mirroring the process' chief shortcoming.

Process falls prey to several fallacies. One is the fallacy that professionals follow directions. One distinction between a professional and an amateur is that a professional must employ their own good judgment in their work. When the process and the judgment conflict, the professional's judgment must guide their actions.

Another chief fallacy is that a process could be universally useful. Any process sufficiently detailed to be useful in one context, will necessarily be out of context in another situation. Each must be customized, imported into each new context. This often materially transforms the process with each use. The tariff on importing processes is high. As one who, early in my career, relied heavily upon methodology, I've seen the extremes of being process-bound and unbound. I think all but the most delusional, understand that processes at best can provide a frame of reference for considering essentially unanswerable questions. Those who employ the processes as if they answered anything are delusional. This might sound radical, since it seems to contradict much of what passes as conventional wisdom, but as Mary Poppendieck reminded me recently, anyone who thinks that a manufacturing operation works according to the process description has never worked in a manufacturing operation. There are a

thousand and one judgment-based decisions which subtly subvert the defined system so that system can work. And it couldn't work otherwise.

We aspire to create operationally efficient projects, though this, too, is a delusion. We will never have enough repetitions of the same project work effort done in comparable ways to create the statistical information necessary to determine efficiency. Get over it. Our attempts at creating operationally efficient projects are innocent extrapolations of a misunderstanding of a manufacturing model. Get over it.

I call the result of all of this individual professional judgment being introduced into the application of a defined process: a benevolent conspiracy. Such conspiracies are an essential part of every coherent project. Once the individuals choose to take charge and be informed rather than defined by their process descriptions, the effort transforms into something better adapted to the here and the now. No defined process could work without such transformation, and attending to the relationships as we work is a key element in creating this transformation.

We often see project communities spending much of their time creating what I call window dressing, artifacts intended to reassure the process-bound that the adaptive response is, indeed, complying with the defined process. This is not meaningless work, since the process-bound can create considerable havoc when their sensibilities get unsettled. We comply, as the old adage says, by not complying. Processes as written represent a double bind for their user. We spend a lot of time in our workshops helping people discover ways of resolving these 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' situations.

Which brings me to the subject of ethical responsibility. I learned six months after *The Blind Men* was published that it's really a book about ethical responsibility. As I introduce in the book, von Foerster presented the ethical imperative, that we always act so as to increase the number of choices available to us. This is an ethical responsibility because we cannot be stymied if we abide by this rule. But simply proliferating choices is insufficient. We must be able to make well-informed choices if we are to abide by the spirit of the ethical imperative. This is where ethical responsibility comes into play.

The Blind Men illustrate the key elements of each professional's ethical responsibility. First, we have the ethical responsibility to accept our own and our fellow's blindness, not to limit our choices but to properly frame our choosing. Second, we have the ethical responsibility to bring our own purpose into the engagement. This is our own responsibility, because without it, our potential for doing great work is reduced, our choices fade. Third, we have the ethical responsibility to subvert the system so the system can work, to bring our own good judgment into play. Without our

own good judgment, we limit the choices available to us. Fourth, we have the ethical responsibility to initiate trust. Trusting creates trustworthiness, and without trustworthiness, our choices are unnaturally limited. Fifth, we have the ethical responsibility to accept the world as it is, rather than as it's supposed to be or isn't. This attunes us to the context within which we operate, and while this might seem a limiting factor, it actually increases the number of workable choices available to us. Fifth, And finally, we have the the ethical responsibility to make informed choices, not to acquiesce to the defined instructions or to some random or emotional basis, but to choose based upon a deep understanding of who we are and who we aspire to be in the world. We even retain the choice not to so choose, when our well-formed conscious tells us not to. These six ethical responsibilities frame our use of every process, and provide the foundation for meaningfully engaging together. If we each understood our ethical responsibilities and acted to proliferate choices, just imagine how that might transform your project.

I often see process employed as replacements for an ethical foundation for employing them, as if the ethical foundation were an unachievable ideal, and as if any process could adequately replace it. Creating a community comprised of individuals who acknowledges their ethical responsibilities is not a difficult effort, since these responsibilities are usually the tacit intention behind much work. Simply discussing them, making them explicit, provides much of the permission necessary to bring them into broader use. Much of what we do in our project workshops focuses upon awakening individuals to their own ethical responsibilities—for themselves, for others, and for the context within they serve. This is a truly liberating acknowledgement and, I firmly believe, the foundation upon which really great projects emerge, whether informed by orthodox process or not.

You close the book (p. 128) and sign each copy with the statement, "May this elephant emerge whenever you engage." I've read the book now three times, and I fully enjoyed your book summary. I still don't get your closing remark. Please comment.

Have you ever worked on a project where, when it was over, you wanted to do another one like that last one again? If so, you've experienced what I call in the book, coherence. The elephant represents the coherence that emerges when we engage as a community. This coherence seems to be the deeper purpose behind our engagements. It's the source of that feeling that we'd like to do another one like that one again. When this coherence emerges, we find ourselves almost intuitively understanding our role, our relationships, and our responsibilities. When it does not emerge, we have to employ any of a number of reminders to keep that spark alive.

I invoke this wish to say that I hope each of your projects will leave you warmly remembering the experience. That it will be a joy to guide. That it will bring you deep personal satisfaction. This satisfaction is mostly under own own control, something that we are pulling the strings to create, though we can and often do cede this control to others. When we do this, we trade the near certainty of coherence for the chance for it, and this seem like a lousy trade.

Coherence is my aspiration for myself whenever I engage, and I leave this reminder, and end the book with it, to remind you, too.

May this elephant emerge whenever you engage.

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