

13. Sivaraman, Wilson, Chappell: The Creative Process – Music and Project Management

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00:04 Raji Sivaraman: These are all about music. Creativity in music, innovation in music, technology in music, design in music, all of that stuff, and project management.

00:13 Chris Wilson: We think there may be things that the arts can tell business and industry about. Certainly, how to approach more creative solutions, potentially.

00:23 Duncan Chappell: Creative music, project management. Okay, I'll run with it.

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00:27 Speaker 1: From the Washington DC Chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

00:38 Kendall Lott: Truth, beauty, art and project management. Last fall at the 2014 Project Management Institute Leadership Institute Meeting in Phoenix, I met with Raji Sivaraman, accomplished project manager and international management speaker, and Duncan Chappell, former president of the Project Management Institute's United Kingdom Chapter and the current university ambassador for that chapter, to find out more about Duncan's university outreach efforts.

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01:06 DC: I've been in contact with over 30 universities this year. We are trying to reach out to the younger generation, make them aware of project management, how important project management skills are in terms of translating across to life skills. When I started I was a volunteer of one. I now have a team of about 20 people. So, we've done everything from just providing a guest lecturer all the way through to a nine-day summer school, Pan-European. They had 30 students sign up for this thing within two weeks.

01:36 RS: It's all so new to them. So it's so interesting. They'll soak everything and then they'll come out with a whole bunch of things that you've never heard of and you have never even thought of. And that's the most interesting part because there is no preconceived notion, there is that, "It should be done this way. Oh, it's got to be this particular table or this particular strategic whatever mapping." Nothing, 'cause they have no clue.

02:02 KL: That's Raji, the connector, the instigator.

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02:06 DC: Raji introduced me to friend of hers called Chris Wilson who is a creative music lecturer. And when she first put it forward, I thought, "Creative music, project management. Okay, I'll run with it. Let's see where this goes." And so, I met Chris, and his whole angle on this was he recognizes the fact that project management skills translate into nearly everything that you do, whether it be composing a piece of music, implementing it, performing it, whatever. You need to plan things out.

02:36 KL: I was intrigued, so I decided to call Chris Wilson, Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Derby in England. Our transatlantic conversation took place via Skype and some program notes. There are references to visuals, which you can find on the PMIWDC website with this podcast. Also, you'll notice the Skype audio quality isn't ideal, but the conversation is always discernible, so stay with it.

03:01 CW: It's the assumption, often by practitioners and artists, that the, if you like, the more practical and pragmatic elements of realizing an artistic venture are mundane or they get in the way. Or even at worse, they can compromise your ability to focus creatively, to be an expressive artist. But certainly after speaking to Raji and picking up some of those ideas, and then exploring the body of knowledge and everything the PMI do, I started to realize that they're actually much more alike. In fact, artistic project management and infrastructure project management in many respects, apart from scale, are exactly the same thing.

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03:48 KL: Looking at a great diagram you have, which I won't be able to show my listeners, is essentially a maturity model. I'm seeing your built on concept, the added content, the partially integrated, where it looks like the activities themselves flavor the creative practices, and then ultimately, the fully integrated model where it seems there's almost two different lenses, I think, happening simultaneously. In our world, this looks like a maturity model. Am I reading that right?

04:14 CW: Yeah, absolutely. And I suppose the aim is to make sure that the creative practitioners, or artists, or producers, musicians, whatever it might be, multimedia artists, that they approach creative practice or project work, not conceiving of elements of it being either potentially poisonous to the core practice, or fringe elements, to try and approach the whole thing much more pragmatically. The artistic approach or the way we frame the approach to Gantt charts and project planning from the outset, is to almost ritualistically tear them up once the planning 's been done. [chuckle] Because, that wouldn't be artistic, to follow a map.

04:53 KL: Wow. PMs, how many times have we heard this? We love improved project management, but hate all of the management overhead that keeps us from doing the real work.

05:02 CW: But not to at least spend time to focus and consider on what those steps will involve at the outset, would also mean you're just wondering aimlessly. I think the sense that there are elements of a creative process that are not part of the creative process is not to think holistically. And certainly in our experience, in terms of graduate skills and what our musicians need to be capable of, being able to just produce the raw material is no longer and hasn't been enough for many years. They have to be able to produce the material and take it all the way into the marketplace by hand. So there are practical reasons why this needs to be wrapped up.

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05:44 KL: Project managers have sponsors and stakeholders. It strikes me that the artist faces a significant difference.

05:53 CW: I think that's part of the reason why I try to make a little bit a very false distinction between commercial arts and free art projects. And clearly at the commercial end, One Direction's next album needs to fit a particular need. And I'm sure that's conceived of very differently from Nick Cave's next project, for example, where he'll just do whatever he wants to do.

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06:24 KL: Actually, something I wanted to ask you about, based on what I was reading, which is, you have a little section on contrast and variation?

06:28 CW: Yeah.

06:30 KL: Which I love, because as soon as I read that, I thought, "Oh, we're gonna learn about some baroque music, here." But, no. We didn't. [chuckle]

06:36 CW: I'm sorry.

06:36 KL: We're gonna do something else, right? What I thought was really interesting, is you're drawing an opposition of elements.

06:43 CW: Well, yes. I started to just make a list of what, in my experience, are the stereotypical associations of difference between the arts and civil engineering, construction, IT, etcetera, etcetera. It's more of a list of cultural assumptions, than it is of reality. But those were the things we wanted to try and confront. To what extent is that polarization actually true? If you look through the biographies of great writers, and painters, and sculptors, and artists, and poets, of all description, there are some common patterns that emerge. But a lack of organization is certainly not one of them.

07:24 KL: [chuckle] Or of effort.

07:26 CW: Not quite. Jimi Hendrix, the guitarist, for example, a phenomenal natural talent, as many people would suggest. But very little is written about his practice routines, because that's not very sexy or exciting. But the reality is, he practiced for hours, and hours, and hundreds and thousands of hours, and he practiced some more. It is a natural talent, in one respect. That's a separate conversation, I suspect. It's a product of effort, an organized effort, and application.

08:00 KL: Organized, not sexy or exciting. You've heard that before. But actually art, the outcome of the project, is the product of planned effort.

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08:13 CW: In the later stages when we start actually talking about project management processes,

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considering all the processes, in very simple terms, there's a point at which you need to complete whatever X is. We think through all those individual stages of creative practice and production, and we consider all of the markers that have emerged from previous student projects and we normally sign off as a formal proposal stage. If students haven't given strategic concern to calculated and focused creative risk in one area or another, then they are referred, and they have to identify where and what those risks are intended to be.

08:52 KL: Wow.

08:55 CW: They may be benign. I've never written a song before. I've never written for piano before. I've never worked with this group of musicians before. But, if all they say is, "I write solo guitar pieces, so I'm gonna write a whole bunch more of those," then we say, "That's not good enough. You have to add something." It's need to be something to disrupt your normal way of working in order to get somewhere else.

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09:22 KL: The idea of risk, when properly understood, is that there's tremendous potential for change or reward. For all the devastation that can happen, that's actually the game changers, as they say.

09:34 CW: If you're talking about a self-contained project, it would be advantageous from a business perspective, to be as clear as possible about at least the intended outcomes as soon as possible, because that refines your ability to then drive efficiencies, and plan more effectively. Whereas, it's much more common, and in fact, arguably the golden phase of any sort of self-contained creative project, is the deliberate step into the unknown. The sense of, I suppose, wandering through a landscape until a position suggests itself as a place to stand, if that makes sense.

10:14 KL: You talk about the value of risk as being higher in free art, than ultimately in business. Play with that for me a second.

10:21 CW: We've had about 14 years now, of students completing large-scale creative projects. And if you map back through all of those, and look at how they approached project planning, their interaction or their playfulness with new things, like taking a step out of their comfort zone, and inaugurating or involving a significant element that was new to them, that was risky. Working with a new musician, approaching composition in a different way, attempting to work in a different idiom, or genre, etcetera, etcetera. Much more often than not, those projects are the one that produced excellence, where the highest level of creativity emerged, if you like.

11:00 CW: We spotted this pattern, and we started to realize that when setting out to try and produce the best you've ever produced, the very last thing, obviously, you should do is, look back, and try and draw from your previous strengths, 'cause then all you'll get is a balled together of successes you've already had. But those who are willing to take a real leap, and 'try something new', more often than not, would end up further away from where they were to start with. They would end up somewhere else that was more positive, and produce things that they themselves possibly hadn't even anticipated.

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11:35 KL: Okay. So Chris has really laid out how project management can inform the arts and the creative cycle. But with risk, he changes it. In highlighting its role and value, he shows how ultimately risk improves the product. He revealed how the creative process can inform and improve project management. But there was more. He then offers project managers a radical proposition for improvement from the creative perspective.

12:00 CW: Having looked through the body of knowledge in a number of other areas, project management text, there aren't many references to having fun.

12:10 KL: [laughter] No, they're not.

12:13 CW: In fact, managing other projects being a rewarding or enjoyable fun experience for the project manager doesn't seem to feature very prominently anywhere that I've found. [chuckle] But it certainly does in the mind of artists, as much as we're prepared to struggle and to suffer in many cases.

12:32 KL: And how do you see this experimentation in play then, informing project management?

12:37 CW: I suppose the thing that struck me was, what would happen if in an agile project management model or any other particular design, you strategically focused on which elements at which parts or which parts of a process there would be openness for play or deviation? And I don't know to what extent that might be possible. I suppose the larger the scale a project, with things like IT projects, it's unfeasible in certain cases, but perhaps more so for architectural projects or for educational projects focusing on and identifying for example which elements in here or what parts of this process can we focus play and experimentation more directly.

13:23 KL: There's some reason to believe we're onto something here when you say that, because if in fact we're supposed to have some fun to allow us to be better at what we do, it's not a function of whether project management wants it or not, it's a function of the individuals in it. We ought to look for those opportunities to create it.

13:39 CW: I think that is emerging and you don't have to look too far across the corporate sector to find examples of that, and playful architecture and soft play areas, and soft boundaries in terms of working environments. And we think there may be things that the arts can tell business and industry about certainly how to approach more creative solutions potentially. And then focusing on those areas to try and connect that into a more meaningful approach to project management over all.

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14:09 KL: Special thanks to my guest Raji Sivaraman, Duncan Chappell, and Chris Wilson. Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Post production performed at Empowered Strategies and technical and web support provided by Potomac Management Resources. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time keep it in scope, and get it done.