Creative Projects

By Ida Rohne

When discussing project management I often encounter attitudes that place project management in opposition to creative expression. The reasons for this could be varied, but those that most frequently stand out are misconceptions about the nature of project management and the project manager role. Commonly held beliefs range from project management being suited to certain industries only, being rigid and onerous, and being the antithesis to creativity.

According to the PMBOK (2013) “Project Management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements” (p.5). I fail to understand how this approach would stifle creativity. Quite the contrary, the dichotomy created by placing project management and creativity at opposite ends of the spectrum, could in fact hamper creativity. Those who believe project management to be incompatible with creative environments, miss out on the benefits of, for example, expert stakeholder analysis. Likewise, it would be difficult to demonstrate how thorough risk identification and assessment would hinder the success of a project. A project needs both creativity and a structured management framework to succeed, and there is no logical reason why these can’t coexist.

A search online for ‘project management and creativity’ throws up several hits related to discussions about the need for project managers to be creative. Some project managers are naturally more creative than others, but in this respect they are no different than other professionals. In line with current work environments, where employees are increasingly expected to have a broad skills base and varied expertise, project managers are expected to excel in communications, leadership and innovation. Being open to new ideas and alternative forms of management are important in all professions. What I find lacking is a debate about why it is presumed we cannot have both formal process and creativity on a project. Personally, I find the choice between one or the other limiting.

Take for example projects in the film industry, which are characterised by high complexity and high risk. It is an industry where artistic expression, logistics and financial management are closely linked to solid communication and people skills. A production manager is under considerable pressure to make all aspects run smoothly and according to strict timelines, while keeping stakeholders happy. Also, the nature of filmmaking is such that almost every plan is guaranteed to change, often and unexpectedly. The physical environment, financial issues, needs and demands of stakeholders and the challenge of coordinating a variety of experts and creative talent, make filmmaking a volatile and unpredictable undertaking.

The potential benefits for a creative industry in adopting formal project management are numerous. A very obvious advantage is that it creates opportunities for artists to focus on their achievements, while an expert manages the nitty gritty of finances, logistics, contracts, procurement, communications and risk assessments. For example, while the project manager attends to the schedule delay and increased costs caused by bad weather, the risks involved in changing locations, the replacement stunt person’s contract, and the sudden and unexpectedly uncooperative behaviour of the main sponsor, the creative team and crew can get on with the job of making the film. The ideal situation would be one where project management is appreciated for contributing an additional layer of expertise and knowledge to filmmaking, rather than replacing or hindering other processes.

To generate meaningful discussion about creativity in project management, we need to question why, in the case of this profession, the framework rather than its application, is perceived to be inflexible. A skilful project manager knows how to manage both creativity and formal tools. The discussion needs to move on from the focus on the creativity of the project manager and address polarising attitudes such as those that claim project management cannot be implemented successfully in a creative industry. That in itself is not a creative approach.