

***Managing and Working in Project Society*¹**

Championship or Collective Behavior - Another Look at Entrepreneurial Activities

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The emergence of a Project Society points to the need to take a closer look at what is happening in practice in the business world as it presently functions. One important statement is: “The traditional way of approaching economic activity becomes obsolete in the emergent Project Society”, (Lundin et al., 2015, 1). This general statement signals the possible need to take a close look at what has been taken for granted previously. In that regard, our understanding of successful development tends to be evolutionary. That is, we build on concepts that have been accepted over time. One of these has been the role of a champion in a project – the definition of which is supplied to us from Schon (1963, 84). “Essentially, the champion must be a person willing to put himself/herself on the line for an idea of doubtful success. He or she is willing to fail. But he/she is capable of using any and every means of informal sales and pressure in order to succeed”.²

We let the focus on the champion be in our main concern. The champion is in fact described as the one person around whom everything orbits. It is in line with the idea of the project manager as being the one in charge and with all the responsibilities, the person who receives all the praise if things go well and all the blame when things don't. Others on the team are then described as followers to do what they are told to do.

But the world keeps changing – possibly differently in different parts of the world and so are the habits on organizing in projects. Life is not getting simpler. It is nowadays very difficult to identify project management with a single manager. Further, in practical projects, people take on informal roles in a context where formal roles also exist.

As an illustration, the Swedish Project Academy (see Lundin & Söderholm, 2012), where practitioners and researchers cooperate, every year awards the title “Project Manager of the year” in the Swedish context. From the very beginning (the academy was founded in 1994) it has in fact been very difficult to locate the one person to receive the award. In 2016 there were two award winners (see Ragnarsson & Lundin, 2017) who both worked on the same project, but had slightly different areas of responsibilities. Awarding more than one person has in fact happened quite often (even though the project has been the same). Consequently,

¹This series of articles is based on the concepts in the book [Managing and Working in Project Society](#) by Rolf A. Lundin, Niklas Arvidsson, Tim Brady, Eskil Ekstedt, Christophe Midler and Jorg Sydow, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015. The book won the PMI David I. Cleland Project Management Literature Award in 2016.

²The Schon reference refers to the champion as a male, but in an effort to make our discussion about champion gender neutral, we transformed the citation to make it more in line with present facts. In the group of “project managers of the year” several are females.

in the academy we have had several discussions about locating and awarding “the project of the year” and not let the focus be on awarding “the project manager of the year”. Thereby, we would recognize the collectivity of the project efforts. It would be suggested that this line of thinking would hold for Sweden and the Nordic countries, and is somewhat in line with similar findings around the world.

Now permit us to go to entrepreneurship. In the Lundin et al text (2015, 220-223) it is suggested that research on projects and entrepreneurship have followed parallel, but separate paths. Perhaps it is time to bring them back together. A recent study has been conducted in which both early-stage entrepreneurial activity (individual) and entrepreneurial employee activity (organizational, e.g., intrapreneurship) have been identified and compiled for 44 separate countries (World Economic Forum, 2015). Sweden was included in the 44 countries studied. Attention was given to both early-stage entrepreneurial activity (generally activity of individuals) and entrepreneurial employee activity (activity of employees within a group – commonly referred to as “intrapreneurship”). Among developed, industrial countries Sweden was on the low end of activities of individual entrepreneurs at approximately 5 percent of the population (World Economic Forum, 2015, 7-11), whereas the U.S., for instance, was at around 11 percent. Sweden was on the high end, however, of entrepreneurial employee activity, approximately 10 percent, so in combination study suggested that the country had a combined effort of around 15 percent of entrepreneurial activity in the population.

This is our observation on Sweden’s 10 percent. In a recent case study of a Swedish platform project of an intrapreneurship type, it was determined that no one champion of the project was to be found. Instead, “just highly motivated individuals in a group” were associated with the development of the project (Burström and Wilson, 2014, 511). That was surprising because the authoritative study on platform projects (Chai et al, 2012) identified a champion commonly in their 242 project sample. Possibly, the high motivation might in part be explained by the special character of the project and the fact that success was ascribed to the team rather to any isolated individual. In effect, this was big business; the future of the company was at stake so this project under study had a high profile for everyone and was of a personal interest for everyone in the entire group. Just as our situation with the Swedish Project Academy, the notion of a champion might not have a clear attractiveness in respondents’ thinking. Participant tended to be more collectively oriented. Heroes, culprits and champions are terms used to describe events and personalities. Not so much in Sweden. In general, Swedes tend to be cautious in their statements and in outspoken attitudes. Responsibility is shared; ergo, it was the group that did it. We did follow up on champions and championship among individuals doing research on projects in the group at Umeå. It was six for six. None of them could say that they had encountered the term in any of their studies.

That does not say of course that there are not Swedish champions. Of those who have been appointed Project Manager of the Year, there is essentially only one who could be denoted a “champion”, Björn Helander. He received the award in 2010 for starting and leading the “Save the Sea Eagle” project. In the middle of the former century, the sea eagles were close to extinct in the Baltic area. The reasons were many: the fish in the Baltic was full of poisons due to pollution, people found that sea eagles were a threat to farm animals (the rumor was even that sea eagles had killed babies) so if found eagle nests were often destroyed.

Helander had a personal interest in eagles – for one thing he had written a PhD thesis on sea eagles – so he took on the task to try to save the sea eagles from extinction. In his actions he appeared to be a “soul of fire”. He was able to gain monetary support from the government and other authorities, to get volunteers from all over Sweden to protect sea eagle nests during the crucial period, to get useful food for sea eagles from slaughter houses, and so on. And slowly the species started to recover and are now beyond extinction.

This example of a champion in the line-up of all project managers of the year is the only clear one. It also so happens that the dedication of Helander is exclusively for the sea eagles. As far as we know he has not taken on any other major task with a similar role. One finding is however, that the sea eagle problem cannot be isolated from everything else. System theory tells us that there are connections. It so happens that sea eagles and ospreys use the same habitat, so one effect of the relative success of the sea eagle project became that nowadays ospreys are considered to be an endangered species.

Anyway, the World Economic Forum study reminds us that entrepreneurship and we would say projects are shaped differently in various parts of the world of today. A Project Society does not have the same form or format around the globe and there are likely different degrees of development. In that sense, it is similar to the notion of the “Industrial Society” with the possible exception that the development now is faster due to information technology and more direct – with instant contacts among people in different parts of the world. We might need to talk also about instant projectification where some development steps are simply jumped over (in another parallel to industrial society).

Going back to the original question of differences concerning championship and collective behaviors, we might reflect on the question of whether they reflect national differences of the Hofstede cultural dimensions type (see Hofstede, 1984). The strong individualistic nature of U.S. culture could indeed impart a strong championship content in the Chai (2012) sample. On the other hand, Sweden is characterized as being more feminine (as compared to masculine) meaning that the society in general is more inclusive rather than exclusive). According to Hofstede (2013) there is an appreciation for consensus in Sweden where people value equality, solidarity and quality in their working lives. This carries over into entrepreneurship as well as project management, which both tend to be more collective as compared with an individualistic approach.

Alternatively, there is an age difference gap (with youngsters presumably more apt to make use of the net) or some other alternative accounting for the differences. “Fluidity” has been a concept used to describe the direction in which the world is going in total nowadays in terms of stable norms and directions (Bauman, 2013). It might also be a matter of different levels of Project Society developments. It has been illustrated in repeated studies of cultural dimensions that the way in which they can be characterized change with time. The development of a Project Society has been very strong, but is different around the world. At the same time, it is evolving. The patterns are molded and evolving, so rather than finding patterns following the paths of the development as in the industrial society, future developments are unpredictable. It appears that the world society of today is more divergent than ever considering the political, social and economic development.

So, where does that leave us relatively to the question in the title? With this piece, we have merely added something to the question: Championship or collective behavior? From whence commit thou? We are sure that someone will have or will get the answer. It is not only interesting, but probably important for the future development of projects in practice and research on temporary organizations.

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