

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Shadow Working in Project Management

Towards new levels of consciousness in groups

By Joana Bértholo

‘I have yet to meet the famous Rational Economic Man theorists describe. Real people have always done inexplicable things from time to time, and they show no sign of stopping.’

—Charles Sanford Jr., US business executive, quoted in Ket De Vries, M.
(2003; p. 1)

The book *Shadow Working in Project Management* (Bértholo, 2017) is the result of a research project undertaken from 2009 to 2014. It tells the story of an experiential autoethnography, the *Learning Journey*, which sought methods to address unconscious and subconscious traits as they manifest in groups/projects. After this Journey, the author was equipped to return to the literature in project management and explore the implications of the Shadow, to try to answer the main research question – What are the most prevailing Shadows in project management culture? For that, some auxiliary questions had to be addressed, namely

- What is the Shadow and how does it play out in the life of projects?
- To what extent and in what way is project management influenced by unconscious factors in its practice and culture?
- To what extent is the manager’s role the fulfilment of a psychological projection or an archetype?
- In what ways is the Shadow related to personal development and organizational change?

The varied answers draw a map of the dominant Shadow-issues in project management practice and culture. In the forward to the book *Resonant Leadership*, Goleman (2005; p. x) writes that: *‘The first task in management has nothing to do with leading others; step one poses the challenge of knowing and managing oneself’.*

Management is not limited to outer circumstances and resources. Fundamental processes are happening within. Through internal management, the experience of the manager is less an outcome and more a process. Any situation becomes: *‘an encounter with the grander, more complex system described by the new sciences and the organizational systems literature. It also demystifies the relationship to this vast unknown, depotentiates the need for willful control over*

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the environment and over other people in other roles.' (Jones, 2004). These quotes illustrate some guidelines to the research. In addition, important premises were:

- The existence of an unconscious realm;
- The project manager as someone who participates in a shared psychological structure wherein unconscious factors play a significant role;
- Individuals deny traits that belong to them, but which stand as a threat to their sense of self or ego identity;
- These denied traits appear projected in the external environment and create conflict and tension;
- The collective in itself as a source of tension between individual and collective needs;

The consequences are manifold. The way a project manager handles a situation cannot be solely attributed to personality, nor is it merely a result of acquired competencies and learned conduct. These rational aspects, although they are ever present, are in fact in relation to a larger totality. The Shadow is a permanent part of that larger totality, and it comes up generally through conflict or emotionally charged situations; in lack of drive or motivation; addictive and compulsive behaviour occurs, sensations of strong instability; somatic bodily symptoms, diseases, nervous ticks, allergies, and all sorts of bodily manifestations, among other forms the Shadow has to show itself.

What is outside of awareness plays out in our everyday lives (see Freud, Jung, Wilber, Zweig). *Projection* and *transference mechanisms* are the central mechanisms by which the Shadow manifests. These terms have been retrieved from the somewhat obscure jargon of the analyst or the psychologist and are being integrated in popular discourse, as well as in PM theory. Bowles defined the *Organization Shadow* as the '*facts which organizations wish to deny about themselves, due to the threat posed to self-image and self-understanding and, more generally, the need to be viewed in a favourable light by others.*' (Bowles, 1991; p. 387). It is a useful extrapolation of the definition of the individual Shadow. When we speak about the Shadow of a project we are speaking about the Shadow of that project's active culture at play, in the sense of its values, norms, etc. Different projects carry different Shadows, and the quest for a Shadow-free project is fruitless, as is the quest for a Shadow-free human being.

We all carry Shadows, they change through time, but they are not something we can get rid off, they are something we can be aware of and that can lead us to a more mindful life. According to Jung (1966; pp. 284-5) '[The Shadow is] *the thing a person has no wish to be. It is everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him – for instance inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies.*' The Shadow is that about ourselves we find unpleasant or unbearable. It contains aspects that appear contrary to the ego ideal or to the ego identity. Therefore, it becomes a reservoir of untapped potential, rich in raw emotions and primal drives, the disavowed, poorly developed and undervalued contents of the individual psyche – but also our highest morality, creativity, and power (the *Light Shadow*). When the disliked qualities are removed from view (positive or negative traits) they are also removed from supervision. They do not stop existing. Instead, they play out in unpredictable ways, usually erupting unexpectedly, potentially in hurtful forms to self or others. Afterwards, a deep sense of humiliation, shame, or guilt can be experienced. These are clear Shadow-pointers. "*Confrontation with the shadow produces at first a dead balance, a standstill*

that hampers moral decisions and makes convictions ineffective or even impossible. Everything becomes doubtful.” (Jung, 1963; para 708).

The most prevalent Shadow of the discipline is arguably the one that puts the discipline at stake: What if ultimately nothing can be managed? Management can be called to hold the tension of that which cannot be managed, paradoxical as it may sound. In paradox lies the ultimate task of all Shadow processes. Unmanageability is intolerable because it puts leaders and managers in a place of vulnerability. It means accepting fallibility, dealing with deep feelings of helplessness.

Argyris (1990; p. 30) explores this further in his work: *‘Because defensive routines are accepted as inevitable and natural, and because they are unmanageable and not to be influenced, it is not too surprising that the most common reaction to them is a sense of helplessness about changing them. Employees in industrialised societies appear as fatalistic about them as peasants do about poverty.* That refers to one of the crucial issues: exploring our resistance to change. The many defence mechanisms, including self-boycott, that individuals and groups engage with just to be able to keep face. What the techniques experienced must offer are creative strategies to allow safety in bringing down those barriers, so a communication between these undesirable traits and the centre of the Self can be established, and new boundaries drawn. In this sense, after Shadow-work, a project expands in scope and possibilities.

Another important finding was that the unconscious communicates through imagery, symbols, and metaphors. This is relevant if we consider how much the dominance of text, speech, and discourse in project management practice relates largely to the conscious mind. The subconscious mind, however, communicates through feelings, emotions, body symptoms, active imagination, sensations, and dreams, as confirmed in the Learning Journey.

The *Learning Journey* took inspiration from Roth and Kleiner’s *Learning History*, as a first-person narrative encompassing many voices. It focused on forms of Shadow-work (techniques to handle the Shadow) and the cultures surrounding them. These practices were taught in a more or less dogmatic format: rules, fixed forms, and expectations for how participants should behave. Nonetheless, flexibility and openness towards learning in the field of transformative practices was found to be high, in the sense that many people attend many different experiences and share their stories from setting to setting. Often facilitators and coaches experiment with each other’s methods, integrating what seems to be appropriate for their own work. Being a very wide field of practice, there are many schools, many traditions, and many faiths. Most of the practitioners interviewed showed a strong conviction that the technique they mastered was the one that had the strongest impact. Nevertheless, most showed interest in learning about other techniques.

That helps explain why certain features, such as role-playing, can be found across very different methods. As said, what all these tools aim at is to build a new channel of communication between different parts of the self. The main Shadow practices consider a complex and multifaceted individual who needs change to be simultaneously profound in terms of depth (vertical) as well as across-realms in terms of scope (horizontal). There is a prevailing mindset that tends to move towards a combination of factors and away from one-way approaches. Some techniques are fast and intense, others demand months of continuous practice, while others call for a space of retreat. Deep and sustainable change seems to be something that cannot be achieved in an isolated workshop experience. Interviews as well as direct observation indicated that change takes commitment, continuity – and time. This is something to consider in project

management, where most managers express the need for fast changes and immediate results in their teams.

It became evident along the Learning Journey that we seem to know less about the unconscious on a discursive level than on a practical one. That means that even when we lack the language to explain the mystery of change, we nevertheless have the tools. It also became clear that it is relatively easy to spot the Shadow; what is truly difficult is to *own it*. Integration of the Shadow means that what was once perceived as an outside object ('his rage', 'her arrogance', 'their incompetence', etc.) becomes accepted as a less than ideal part of the Self, but a part of oneself ('my rage', 'my arrogance', 'my incompetence'). Depending on the contents, the work of integration with groups can bring about havoc and feelings of *malaise*. But the goal is wholeness and higher levels of collective consciousness.

Different levels of consciousness lead to very different styles of management. In later stages of development we encounter depictions of the organizational system as 'having a consciousness of its own', references to its 'generative powers', and descriptions of the system as 'engaging in adaptive and evolutionary activities.'

Figure 1 shows the polysemy of the Shadow: The Shadow, a plural phenomena, is dynamic and exists in a scale. The terms used are not synonymous as they stand in different places of the Shadow scale, but they are all addressed as being part of the overarching group of shadow manifestations.

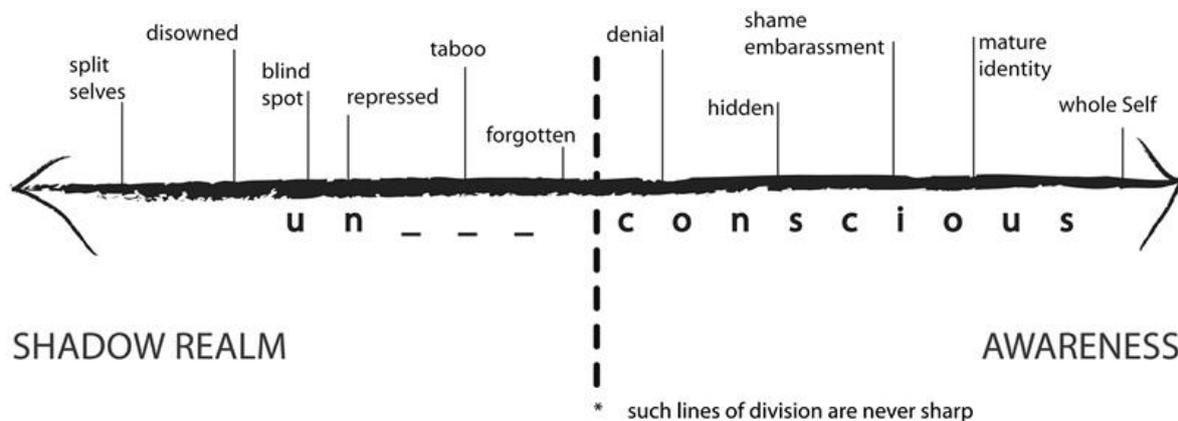


Figure 1: The Shadow Scale

The ability to manage polarities and deal with paradox is essential for the integration of the Shadow. 'I alone must become myself but I cannot become myself alone' is not merely a logic paradox, it is pertinent to understanding individuality within a group/project. Interdependence makes the space of projects even more valid socially and culturally, for the fact that we get together, organize, and make ideas come true. But it clashes with inbred needs of validation and individuality. Ultimately, what one wants and what the group desires rarely ever match.

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Joana Bértholo is a researcher, novelist and playwright. She first attended the Fine-Arts in Portugal, with a focus on Communication Design, and later obtained a PhD in Cultural Studies in Germany. Art processes are her preferred mode of research, using writing as a platform to investigate a wide scope of interests, such as technology, ecology, sustainability and the darker aspects of groups and communities.

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