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Working in the shadows: Exposing our inner demons
Prof Darren Dalcher
Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

Working in the shadows: Exposing our inner demons

By Darren Dalcher, PhD

Last month's column focused on the complexity of the terrain and the difficulty in mapping and making sense of the full scale of reality. An earlier article focused on creation of a culture of cooperation between different disciplines. This article shifts attention to the complexity of individuals, and the cultures and organisations within which they operate. In particular, it highlights the role of light and shadows in determining what we can see and do.

Shadows may conjure up childhood images of playful finger and hand shapes of animals and magical creatures projected onto a wall in front of a torch, flashlight or fire, or perhaps invoke memories of elongated shapes manipulated at dusk, which lengthen as the twilight descends, until they are subsumed by the surrounding darkness when the sun is no longer visible.

The Oxford Dictionary offers two pertinent definitions: '*a dark area or shape produced by a body coming between rays of light and a surface*', or, a term '*used in reference to proximity, ominous oppressiveness, or sadness and gloom*'. Upon reflection it thus becomes possible to focus on two main types of shadows:

- **The darkness that forms**: the former description offered by the Oxford Dictionary refers to the shadow created when an opaque, or translucent, object casts a shadow, as it does not allow the light project projected from a source to pass straight through it.

- **The darkness that lurks**: The latter definition acknowledges a more profound phenomena that could refer to a shadow of war impacting a country; a shadow of performance-enhancing drugs that blights a particular sport; a shadow cast by pests, vermin or disease, or some other threat; or even a more ominous shadow in the mind that encases the soul in darkness. Certain cultures, religions and mythologies also associate shadows with ghosts, demons or the underworld.

The common feature across both types of shadow is the absence of light, which manifests itself as a certain kind of emerging darkness.

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Searching under the lamppost

Light seems to play an important part in driving local inquiry and emboldening the search for knowledge, while shadows and darkness, stifle the local search.

There is an old parable and joke about a police officer who observes a drunken man furiously searching under a streetlight. After a few minutes the police officer approaches to discover that the man had lost his house keys. The officer joins the search, as they both thoroughly and systematically comb the area underneath the streetlight. After repeating the search three or four times, the police officer asks the man if he is absolutely certain he lost the keys there, to which the man replies, '*no, I lost them over there in the park*'.

The officer proceeds to ask why he is searching in that particular spot, and the man replies that '*this is where the light is*'.

Searching under the lamppost is also known as 'the streetlight effect' or the drunkard's search. It was popularised by Abraham Kaplan (1964), and has become an increasingly acknowledged and recognised observational bias where people search by looking in the easiest places. Farris (1969) observes that no matter where behavioural scientists have dropped their keys, they prefer to continue to search for them where it appears lighter, while Freedman maintains that '*researchers tend to look for answers where the looking is good, rather than where the answers are likely to be hiding*' (2010).

The temptation to look under the light, where it is easier to organise a search, continues to appeal to many disciplines (see for example, Shanto & William, 1993; McKenna et al., 2008). Indeed, Noam Chomsky dryly reasons in a 1993 letter that '*Science is a bit like the joke about the drunk who is looking under a lamppost for a key that he has lost on the other side of the street, because that's where the light is. It has no other choice.*' (reported in, Barsky, 1998; p. 95)

It would thus appear that the simplicity and convenience of the proverbial lamppost appeals to both stray dogs and researchers and scientists looking to fix their gaze.

Entering the shadow world

Carl Jung (2014) refers to the *shadow* as an unconscious aspect of the personality, which the conscious ego does not identify in itself, or alternatively, as the entirety of the unconscious. The shadow is also acknowledged as the *dark side* of personality, often associated with negative aspects such as anxieties, fears, low self-esteem and false beliefs and perceptions.

While shadow typically refers to the unknown dark side of the personality, in Jungian tradition, it typically includes everything that is outside the light of consciousness, and may therefore encompass positive as well as negative aspects that remain hidden from the light.

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Stevens reasons that acceptable traits are built into the personality, while the unacceptable ones are hidden or repressed into the subconscious, where they coalesce to form another complex personality as the shadow:

'*Jung felt 'shadow' to be an appropriate term for this disowned subpersonality for there is inevitably something 'shady' about it, hidden away as it is in the darker lumber-room of the Freudian unconsciousness. Unwanted though it is, it persists as a powerful dynamic that we take with us wherever we go as a dark companion which dogs our steps – just like a shadow in fact. Much of the time we manage to ignore it, but it has an uncomfortable way of reminding us of its presence...*' (Stevens, 2001; p. 64)

Extending the previous metaphor, the personality is identified under the lamppost, whilst the *shadow*, containing other aspects, lurks outside the main focus of our lamppost.

Working the shadow side

The shadow side is not limited to individuals. Analysis of failure cases within organisations often reveals surprising patterns in behaviour that defy the espoused norms and expectations of the organisation. Special favours, unexplained deals, broken rules, politics, undocumented procedures, workarounds, escalation of commitment, unjustified promotions and unexplained hiring and firings often feature through special strategic initiatives, projects, as well as business as usual. Such covert, undiscussable and unmentionable actions appear to defy organisational logic and prescriptive manuals; yet, they are inevitably found whenever one starts delving into the organisational dynamics as they are applied in practice.

Egan asserts that the shadow side consists of '*all the important activities and arrangements that do not get identified, discussed and managed*' (1994: p. 4). Since shadow side factors are not normally discussed, they fall outside the reach of ordinary managerial interventions, yet, are likely to impact both the productivity and the quality of work life within the organisation (ibid.; p. 5-6).

Shadow side arrangements, are not limited to negative impacts, and may include informal collaborations, mentoring and support that can add value to the individuals concerned and to the wider organisation. Often they embody informal internal rules and agreements that have tacit recognition. The key feature is that they remain beneath the surface and are undiscussed.

Egan maintains that when an individual enters an organisation, they initially only see what takes place on the surface. After a while, they begin to grasp the multi-dimensional aspects of the organisation, which will typically encompass the following categories (ibid., p. 8):

- Organisational culture
- Personal styles and behaviours of individuals
- Organisational social systems

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- Organisational politics
- The hidden organisation, including ad hoc systems and processes

Understanding what really goes on within organisations, and inside teams, requires working below the surface. It implies giving insights to the fragmentation of organisational life, as well as the culture, relationships, politics and other dynamics that shape organisational life and reality. Systems concepts, such as rich pictures, and complexity theory notions can play a part in mapping some of the interactions, relationships, conflicts and the politics invoked in particular settings. However, there is also a critical need to borrow some of the psychological and psychoanalytical concepts and ideas required to understand how groups, teams, organisations and social systems operate, and how they can be understood, improved and developed.

Shadow working in project management

So what are the implications for project management and how do we begin to address the shadow side of projects?

The shadow side entails a creative potential to develop and grow. An informed dialogue that covers the rational and the shadow side can improve and enhance existing ideas and perspectives and strengthen motivation and work habits. However, in order to consider such aspects, project management requires an infusion of alternative thinking approaches and ideas from other disciplines, including the arts, sociology, psychology and Jungian theory. There is a particular need to develop mindfulness and conscious consideration regarding the shadow side of project undertakings. This month's article by Joana Bértholo, developed from her recent book *Shadow working in project management: understanding and addressing the irrational and unconscious in groups* published by Routledge, addresses that particular gap.

Joana acknowledges that management is not simply a result or an ideal state of affairs, but instead views it as an unfolding process and a collective opportunity for a responsible and integrated agency. The perspective she adopts eschews instrumental rationality opting instead for an inter-dependent and co-creative view of reality. In doing so, she issues an implicit challenge: If rational actors operate within shadow organisations, it behoves all of us to consider the implications and endeavour to rise beyond the assumed instrumentality and instead make sense of the fuller and wider context of project work.

Joana's work is the first book to emerge from a major initiative undertaken by the ICCPM, The international Centre for Complex Project Management. The aim of the initiative was to explore alternative perspectives on project management with a particular emphasis on cross-cultural complex project management, which enabled the research to home in on the far reaching implications and potential of social complexity.

The position adopted by her work offers a powerful proposition for examining the relationship between the individual and the collective, exploring the cross-cultural complexity of managing projects, understanding project management as a culture, and

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ultimately developing a richer understanding of project work. A good starting point is the recognition that people play a far more significant part in the unfolding of project experiences. One interesting implication is the consideration that projects don't fail; it is the people working in them and on them that do! This chimes with an ever-greater focus on leadership and inter-personal skills in the project space.

Joana embraces the shadow side in the context of complex projects ready to engage with the unreasonable, lazy and irrational aspects of project work. The learning journey is a five-year experiential learning expedition into the shadow side of project work which requires the author to make sense of, recognise, label and own the traits identified in the shadow side. The journey entails a rich engagement with culture, dynamics, pressures, the dark side of leadership and other features of the shadow.

Balancing light and shadow

Many individuals remain unaware of the shadow side and the potential it uncovers. Coming to terms with the shadow side, often starts with reflection on the self and the impact and culture surrounding us. Organisational systems regularly emphasise governance and efficiency, while the shadow side embodies creativity, responsiveness and extraordinary leadership that can make things happen in alternative ways, despite the normal systems.

Shadow, however perceived, owes its origin to the light from which it emerges. The contradiction between light and shadow offers the potential to perceive the world differently and develop new and creative ways of engaging with and benefiting from the external environment. Indeed, Stacey (2007; p. 325) asserts that the shadow system pulls the organisation towards chaos and as it enables diversity of thought and approach; it thereby harbours much of the creativity and potentiality that resides within the organisation.

Engaging with the shadow opens up new creative opportunities that overcome dysfunctional culture, rigid procedures, small powerbase, and bureaucratic hierarchies. The secret lies in maintaining a dynamic balance between the rigidity of the conventional system and the flexibility enabled by the alternative arrangements. Being able to maintain such a dual operating system can harvest the edge or zone between efficiency and disruption and innovation required to generate new forms of work and methods of achievement. Ultimately, balancing light and shadow would remain a critical and ethical part of the job of every responsible leader and manager as they endeavour to work in the shadow and learn to operate beyond the comforting gaze of the lamppost.

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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI SMIEEE SFHEA is Professor of Project Management, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 "movers and shapers" in project management and was voted Project Magazine's "Academic of the Year" for his contribution in "integrating and weaving academic work with practice". Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London.

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