

The role of intuition and improvisation in project management

Stephen Leybourne^a, Eugene Sadler-Smith^{b,*}

^a *Plymouth Business School, University of Plymouth, Plymouth PL4 8AA, UK*

^b *Centre for Management Learning and Development, School of Management, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, UK*

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Abstract

Improvisation consists of a combination of intuition, creativity, and bricolage. Intuitions are rapid, affectively charged, holistic judgements arrived at without the apparent intrusion of rational thought. Improvisation and intuition represent two important and related aspects of management in general and of the management of projects in particular. There have been few, if any, studies that have examined the relationship between intuition and improvisation in the context of the management of projects. In this research we used a model of the relationships between project managers' intuitive decision making behaviours, their use of improvisation and project outcomes in order to examine whether or not intuition is used in the management of projects, how it relates to improvisation and how intuition and improvisation are linked (if at all) to project outcomes.

The research employed a cross-sectional survey design ($N = 163$) administered in two waves. Mediated multiple regression analyses revealed a number of statistically significant effects ($p < 0.05$), namely: (1) there is a positive relationship between the use of intuitive judgements and improvisation; (2) there is a positive relationship between experience and improvisation; (3) there is a positive relationship between the use of intuitive judgements and experience; and (4) the use of intuitive judgements is related to externally focused project outcomes.

These findings are discussed in terms of their implications for the following: role of intuitive judgements and improvisation in the management of projects; the ways in which both intuition and improvisation are conceptualised; and the training and development of project managers.

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1. Background

The long-standing dilemma of whether effective managerial action is better served by analytical or intuitive judgements [1] applies as much as to project management as it does to other aspects of business. Managers in general often need to make decisions in loosely structured situations where there may be a paucity of relevant information (leading to uncertainty) or where time is of the essence (and compelling them to act quickly). In such situations managers may call upon their intuitive decision making skills and improvisatory capabilities. In this research we used a model

of the relationships between project managers' intuitive decision making behaviours, their use of improvisation, and project outcomes in order to examine whether or not intuition is used in the management of projects, how it relates to improvisation, and how intuition and improvisation are linked (if at all) to project outcomes. This research is significant both for researchers and practitioners because it has the potential to shed light upon the ways in which project managers process information and make judgements, and upon any improvisational behaviours which they may deploy. Moreover, it contributes more generally to the evolving understanding of the role of intuitive decision making in management. The research is significant for project managers in that its findings may, if incorporated into their training and development programs, enable them

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1483 683101.
E-mail address: e.sadler-smith@surrey.ac.uk (E. Sadler-Smith).

to come to a better understanding of the role of intuition and improvisation in projects.

1.1. *Improvisation*

Improvisation is becoming recognised increasingly as a means by which managers implement and embed strategic change within organisations [2], and an evolving literature is attempting to explain and contextualise this phenomenon. Improvisation has been identified as a combination of intuition, creativity, and bricolage that is driven by time pressures. In a project context improvisation involves moving away from an agreed plan in order to accelerate the implementation of actions [3–5]. Recently, the various constructs that combine to explain organisational improvisation have been extended to include elements of adaptation, compression (of timescales), and innovation [6]. In the 1960s, improvisation was seen by scholars such as Quinn [7] as an organisational dysfunction, in that it led away from the traditional incremental route of ‘plan, then implement’. However, Weick [8] was an early advocate of improvisational activity, and the growing interest in and acknowledgement of this aspect of management has resulted in improvisation being more widely accepted as a skill that can assist in corporate planning exercises. This movement has accelerated in intensity in the 1990s, and given the need for faster cycle times and more innovative solutions to gain or retain competitive advantage [9]; these shifts show few signs of abating.

The move towards managerially sanctioned improvisational activity appears to be affecting how organisations address both the way in which work activity is achieved, and the way in which it is supervised. Many organisations are allowing employees to create time and opportunity to experiment with new, innovative, and hopefully more effective ways of executing work; one result of this is new and complex management challenges. If organisations are creating time, space and opportunity for employees to use improvisational working practices to develop new ways of undertaking tasks, this poses challenges for the control and supervision of work, and also creates opportunities for organisational learning and knowledge creation (via mechanisms such as those suggested by Nonaka and his colleagues whereby tacit knowledge may be made explicit). Moreover, the implications for the training, development and education of managers may be significant.

Improvisation may be seen as relating to how thoughts and action develop over time and in response to environmental cues and stimuli. Ryle [10] suggests that:

“the vast majority of things that happen [are] unprecedented, unpredictable, and never to be repeated. . . [and] . . . the things we say and do . . . cannot be completely pre-arranged. To a partly novel situation the response is necessarily partly novel, else it is not a response” (p. 125).

Ryle’s assertion is that however much an activity is planned there will always be a novel set of circumstances to deal with (which echoes Donald Schon’s notion of ‘art-

istry’ of professional practice). Improvisation requires using resources that are available to hand to resolve unforeseen circumstances: this is the essence of bricolage [11].

From the mid-1990s onwards much of the literature on improvisational work practices within organisations took this stance and applied it to organisational routines and processes. Some of these debates use metaphor to explain the way improvisation is used, for example adopting and applying ideas from jazz performance [12–16], and from improvisational theatre [9,17,18]. Later work used grounded theory to consider the temporal aspects of improvisation, and particularly the pressure to achieve complex tasks to a demanding or compressed timetable [3,4,19]. These theoretical advancements provided the foundations for subsequent empirical work – for example, Akgun and Lynn’s [20] study of the links between improvised new product development and speed-to-market. Latterly, consideration has also been given to the interactions between improvisation and learning [2,6], improvisation and entrepreneurial activity [21,22], the ways in which the tacit knowledge upon which intuition may draw is acquired [23], and the role of experience in the acquisition of tacit knowledge [24].

1.2. *Intuition*

Alongside these developments there has been an upsurge of interest in the role of intuition in management as one way of overcoming the limits of rationality in loosely structured situations [25–29]. In this context intuition may be defined as “a cognitive conclusion based on decision maker’s previous experiences *and* emotional inputs” [30, p. 93 *emphasis added*]. The view that we are advocating of intuition accommodates the notion of experiences and analyses ‘frozen into habits’ (to paraphrase Herbert Simon). These previously learned patterns leads to decisions being executed, often very rapidly, upon the basis of an ‘unconscious reasoning’ process which may have an affective component (a ‘gut feel’ or ‘hunch’). This may give the impression almost of a ‘sixth sense’ whilst actually being based upon expertise and prior learning (both explicit and implicit). With respect to intuition’s affective facet neuro-physiologists such as Antonio Damasio (see below) have advanced the hypothesis that ‘gut feel’ acts as a somatic ‘alarm bell’ warning for or against particular courses of action in advance of conscious reasoning (he and his colleagues refer to this as the ‘somatic marker hypothesis’).

The definition of intuition offered above (a cognitive conclusion based on decision maker’s previous experiences *and* emotional inputs) is that of Burke and Miller [30] who derived it from a study that employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 60 managers across medium to large sized firms in the USA (each of whom had at least 10 years experience). A majority of respondents (56%) were of the view that intuition was decision making based upon

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