

The staging model: The contribution of classical theatre directors to project management in development contexts[☆]

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Abstract

This paper derives principles of staging projects as they emerged in theatre tradition and as they have been formulated by important directors, especially by Reinhardt, Stanislavski, and Brook. The four principles which are proposed to form the staging model for the management of product development projects are: the play–director–actor fit as a criterion for selecting projects, text interpretation as a model for interpretive planning, rehearsals as a novel way to frame meetings during project implementation, and the premiere as the most motivating goal of projects under the conditions of uncertainty, dynamisms, and a lack of goal clarity. The relevance of the model for the management of product development projects is discussed.

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1. Introduction: theatre and product development

The terms directing and staging (in German *Regie* and *Inszenierung*, the latter meaning “to put into scene”; similar in French *mise en scène*) refer to all artistic and technical processes, which transform a text into actual theatrical existence (Jaques Copeau, cited in [1]). This includes both the process of developing the performance and the repeated showing of the performance on stage (the result of staging). Here the first part is of interest, because the development of a performance, from the decision to choose a specific play for the stage until bringing it onto the stage the first time (the premiere), is not only *like* a project in a metaphorical sense, but it *is* a project. It includes all features of a standard definition for projects. More specifically, it is a product development project and, consequently, the director has the function of a project manager and the actors form the project team.

Directors and actors, however, will hardly characterize themselves with such modern project management terms, because the history of theatre is much longer than the comparatively short history of modern project management. During this long tradition a set of successful routines emerged which, consequently, could be considered as models for project contexts outside of theatre. This paper derives a set of principles of staging projects which are proposed to especially contribute to development projects. Supplementing recent studies of actual practices of project management in theatres [2], this will be done in this paper by analysing the writings and reports about the practice of classical theatre directors, especially of Max Reinhardt, Konstantin Stanislavski and, because of expressing his principles most explicit in his books, mostly to Peter Brook. They are commonly viewed as most significant figures for the 20th century theatre, as directors and as theoreticians on theatre. Their influence is comparable to the impact of thinkers like Max Weber, Henri Fayol, or Chester Barnard on management.

In the first two sections of the paper I will describe aspects of development projects which are, on the one hand, similar to staging projects and which, on the other hand, provide

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opportunities to learn from staging projects in general and from theatre directors in particular. The subsequent main part of the paper will be structured along these aspects.

2. The relevance of staging for product development contexts

Development projects range from small adaptations of existing products, which require only a small team, to projects like the development of the Boeing 777 [3] with a complex hierarchy of 250 teams. The larger and more complex a project, the more it requires sophisticated processes and tools to distribute tasks, information, and responsibilities and to integrate the various activities. Despite such large differences, compared to, for example, engineering projects, all development projects are characterized through relatively low analyzability [4], high dynamism and uncertainty [5,6], and frequently unclear and conflicting goals [7–9]. While standard project management tools have been designed for a well-structured world of large engineering projects and while they are necessary to some extent even in large development projects, the conditions of development projects may undermine the utility of planning tools [10]. Therefore the standard model and its tools have been either replaced or adapted in the context of product development under high uncertainty or high dynamism [5]. Under such conditions, the ability to clarify the project definition and its goals [9,11], to interpret what is going on in the project [12], the ability to cooperate and integrate team members with diverse backgrounds and team building [13] have been identified as significant drivers of performance. The next section gives an overview of such conditions in development contexts, the main tasks, and frequent problems in applying the standard approach to project management.

3. Main tasks in development projects

3.1. Selection of projects, team leaders, and team members

Selection criteria for R&D projects are based mainly on financial considerations, such as discounted cash flow analysis or real options valuation. In case of a positive project decision, team members and team leaders are frequently selected based on availability, which often results in low motivation, discontent, and low commitment to the project [13]. Lack of leadership and poor team building increase the likelihood of failing considerably [13]. Especially in early project phases teambuilding is equally important and difficult, because teams are usually multifunctional [14]. The importance of project leadership in the context of research and development has found early attention [15]. Since then many studies, based on several leadership theories, have been conducted, although there is a lack of leadership studies in the context of innovation and development projects [9]. A review of this literature [16] suggests that above average performing leaders in R&D contexts engage in multiple roles, show transformational behaviours and vary their behaviours across leader–member dyads.

Sometimes leadership has to be taken over by senior management or even the CEO [17], if an innovation requires support and resources to an extraordinary degree. Taking this into account, the availability of a project leader who is able to work with team members should be treated on an equal footing with technical and financial criteria for the selection of development projects.

3.2. Planning and its relationship to project work

The larger and the more complex a development project the more planning will be necessary to define work packages, to derive an organizational structure, to analyze coordination needs, and to guide the relationships between sub-teams [18]. Because development contexts operate under conditions of high uncertainty, however, plans can hardly be viewed as perfect guidelines through the whole course of the project. Instead of, for example, detailed scheduling of the project with sophisticated PERT-graphs, planning will be limited to the setting of frequent milestones and to the assignment of project reviews after fixed time intervals [5]. Final commitments will be delayed as long as possible [19]. Nevertheless, despite of little significance planning *results* may have, planning *processes* become increasingly important under conditions of equivocality and uncertainty [20]. At the start a development project requires interpretation of project goals and of stakeholder needs. Further, the higher uncertainty and dynamism the more planning will be recursive rather than being a linear process. Planning tasks, such as information gathering, analysis, alternative generation, and evaluation will be iterated several times until coarse-grained descriptions of problem states result in detailed and concrete specifications. Thus, planning is a process of ongoing interpretation [21].

Consequently, project work can hardly be viewed as mere execution of a predetermined project plan. Even in development projects with large budgets, the final design has to emerge from the process of trial and error learning to a considerable proportion [22]. For this, permanent communication between team members, between sub-teams, with outside experts, customers, suppliers and with other stakeholders through all available channels is necessary [23–25]. Opportunities for intensive communication in development projects are provided through, for example, partnering teams [26], customer–supplier–project triads [27], process-based exchange relationships between customer and supplier [28], and in teams which are formed for specific phases of the project only [29]. However, intensive communication and frequent meetings face potential problems such as political behaviour in projects [30], the overly use of meetings as status-auctions [31], or simply negative attitudes towards meetings [32].

3.3. Tests

Frequent tests and design reviews on subsequent design stages contribute most significantly to success in

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