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THE PM BOK CODE

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Abstract— This paper puts forward the argument that PM is spreading because it is a well adapted collection of memes, and that the Project Management Institute (PMI®) Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) version of project management (the PM_BOK Code) has more to do with the appearance of a capability for productivity than it does with actual productivity. It suggests that project management is evolving in a toxic manner, and that corporations will reap more benefit from it than people. The paper concludes with a call for a reformation of the PMBOK®.

Index Terms— PMBOK, memetic, impression management

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper plays on the popularity of such books as the *The Bible Code* and *The Da Vinci Code*. These books allude to a secret message hidden within scripture or works of art. This paper makes no claim of uncovering a secret or hidden message, but it does profess to decipher the memetic code of project management (PM) to reveal the real reason why PM is so prevalent.

Why is PM so prevalent? Even though the discipline of PM is ubiquitous in Western society it exhibits many inexplicable and contradictory aspects. The prevalence of PM continues to increase across all business sectors and all geographical regions, with companies suggesting that projects are a vital contributor to future business success, and that projects are the key enabler of business change [1]. PM is also consuming more of corporate training budgets than ever before [2]. An increasing amount of Universities are also delivering PM courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and at least one corporation is supporting the teaching of PM at high-schools [3]. The bulk of such training and teaching is modeled on the Project Management Institute (PMI®) Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide).

However, despite the prevalence of PM, organizations report that project failure is commonplace and that the delivery of projects to cost, time and benefits is not improving [1, 4, 5]. It is therefore valid to ask why PM is so widely and commonly occurring, accepted, and practiced, when it still fails to live up to expectations.

Methods for reasoning an answer to this question extend across the traditional and non-traditional. Traditionally, PM is

considered to enable individuals and organizations to be more successful in project delivery and thereby improve business performance [2]. However, PM literature rarely attempts to make any real causal connection. Nontraditionally, a memetic approach puts forward the case that PM behaviour is a by-product or consequence of the natural selection process, and whilst not an adaptive trait itself that is essential for the survival of the human species, it does indirectly support and enhance the existence of its practitioners.

In this paper I argue that PM is spreading because it is a well adapted collection of memes. I characterize the PMBOK® Guide version of PM as a memetic code, the PM_BOK Code. I suggest that at the cultural level where behavioural traits are selected, each individual or corporation that utilizes the PM_BOK Code is given a social competitive advantage. In marketing terms, individuals and corporations brand themselves with PM and create an impression on the corporate landscape as one who has the values and traits that are so highly regarded in today's Western corporate culture.

I begin by presenting the argument that humans are hardwired for memes, and that memes are the engines of cultures. Some Western memes drive the behaviour we recognize as PM. I then discuss the PM_BOK Code and highlights how it is concerned with driving individuals to 'act' professional. To explore how this acting behaviour or performativity functions at the level of selection, the cultural level, I use a theme within symbolic interactionism (in sociology) called impression management (IM). Next I argue that in order to socially survive in the organizational environment, individuals are driven (a mechanism the PM_BOK Code uses to replicate) to 'puts on' the performance of project manager as an actor would perform project scenes in the theatre of organizations. These actors are compelled to play their scenes on particular sets; obligated to wear a costume and read a script, and use specific props; and all this before an audience of senior management, stakeholders, and project workers. Finally, I reflect on the cultural environment where PM thrives – Western capitalism, and contemplate on the subjugating effect the PM_BOK Code and the corporation meme is having on the freedom of humans.

2. HARDWIRED FOR MEMES

The term 'human nature' is a generally agreed upon term used to describe a bundle of tendencies shaped by the evolutionary processes of natural selection. With regard to the physical body, all humans share a common or universal genome which is the genetic information in DNA that directs the physical construction of each individual. A set of genes in DNA is called a genotype. And the physical expression of the genotype, characterised by the body and its behaviour, is called a phenotype. Our phenotype (our nature) is therefore a result of

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the bidirectional interaction between genotype and the physical, social, and cultural environment.

Human thoughts or memories are stored across the brain as a vast network of interconnecting cells. Memes manifest as physical brain structures, patterns of neuronal wiring. The actual physical composition of such structures probably varies from person to person and changes throughout ontogeny. In early human history, those brains that were better capable of spreading memes were favoured by natural selection [6]. The human brain today is literally hardwired for memes.

3. ENGINES OF CULTURE

Humans all share a common psychological architecture because of the common neurological architecture of our brains. However, we do not all share the same culture, as all over the world human societies have experienced and adapted to different environmental circumstances, cumulative experiences, and historical events. Throughout time, place and circumstance, humans have formed different collections of memes (i.e. ideas, beliefs & practices) that make up their culture. Even culture is individualized because of the unique interaction of each person's genes, memes, and physical and social environment. In short, everyone experiences the world in substantially the same way; but everyone's subjective knowledge about the world is socially derived [7].

Memes are the replicators that create culture, and behaviour is its expression or phenotype [8]. Cultural selection is a Darwinian process by which particular traits increase or decrease in frequency due to their differential probability of being adopted by individuals [8]. Cultural selection therefore works on variations in cultural traits in the same way as natural selection works on biological ones.

Culture is not an evolutionary adaptation. The ability to imitate was the human adaptation which had the consequence of creating culture. Culture brings about diverse behaviours, skills, and artefacts that get copied. Those that get reliably and frequently copied individually undergo cultural selection and further create new behaviours, skills, and artefacts, each of which has the potential to be a successful meme in its own right. This is the case with PM, as various memes came together and mutated in the minds of some in the West during the mid-20th century [9]

4. WESTERN MEMES AND PM

Not all human thought, emotion and behaviour patterns are brought about directly by the biological natural selection process. Religion, philosophy, art, science, even the faculty of language in its broadest sense [10] are consequential of other cognitive capacities and information processing abilities of the human brain. However, these as well as others such as corporation and government do indirectly support and enhance our existence. Religion for example exhibits mental health and social solidarity control functions such as promoting reproduction and survival through the family unit, while science helps us exploit our natural environment.

It has been argued that PM is behaviour brought about as a consequence of the replicating behaviour of a particular collection of memes [11]. These memes are mutually compatible, each one selected for its capacity to cooperate with the others. These memes have survived well in the West and bring about behavioral traits in their hosts which can be characterized as the systematic, methodological, and frugal approach to the management of time, cost, and resources, including people, for its own end [9]. It is this behaviour that we commonly recognise as the PMBOK® Guide version of PM – the PM_BOK Code.

4.1. The PM_BOK Code

In its simplest form the PM_BOK Code manifests as a code of conduct or practices which encompass many forms from methodologies to ethical and professional behaviour. A traditional view of the professions is that they are purely productive organization, comprising experts possessing skills and knowledge vital to society. More critically, professions are viewed as the mobilization of monopoly power to secure power and influence for a privileged minority [12, 13]. Further, they are societal structures of power and oppression [14], for the benefit of corporations. A memetic approach to the professions suggests that the PMI® is one mechanism PM memes use to replicate [11].

Hodgson [15] argues that the intent and effect of the professionalization of PM is the subjection of employees, providing security and dependence, whilst maintaining subordination and creating existence (meaning or identity). He has observed how project managers 'put on' a professional performance and behave in a manner that is consistent with an assumed professional identity. I suggest that this is but one mechanism the PM_BOK Code uses to survive.

Butler [16] suggests, similarly to Goffman [17], that we "construct" our identity and our social environment through our regularly repeated "acts," and that we present to ourselves to the world as in a performance. The identity or role of project manager is therefore not original, because the identity or impression that is constructed, the act that is performed, or the script that is run has been created long before any individual picks up the script and enacts it.

5. IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

IM is concerned with the conscious or unconscious attempt to influence the perceptions of other people about a person (e.g. self, friends, enemies, stakeholders), an object (e.g. organization, deliverable, product) or event (e.g. transgression, task, status report) by strategically regulating and controlling information in the social interaction [18, 19]. In general, IM is composed of at least two sub processes namely impression motivation and impression construction [20]. The former, is the desire to create particular impressions in the minds of others, but this may not manifest as an overt action. The latter, of most concern to this paper, is where individuals consciously alter or 'put on' (e.g. via self-description, nonverbal behaviour and

props) behaviours to affect the impressions others have of them [20].

IM is a pervasive feature of social behaviour. Although IM is used to gain approval and achieve valuable interpersonal goals, it also is a fundamental component of all social transactions. In order to interact, people must define the situation by selecting the relevant social scripts and the roles each will play. IM communicates people's definitions of their identities, motives, and orientation toward the relationship. Once identities are established, each participant has an obligation to behave consistently with the identity he or she projected and to respect the other's identity by treating them appropriately.

The social psychology literature deals with strategic IM which is designed to advance the self-interests of the individual [20-24]. Some of this literature characterizes this behaviour as "gamesmanship" and focuses on how people strategically package (use and conceal) information to accomplish their objectives [25]. Much of the stock in the psychology and business sections of bookstores, which can be exemplified by Carnegie [26], similarly deal with how to exert social influence by making the right impression on others. Research shows that people are good at using IM [27], and that it is effective in altering the way people are perceived [28]. A prime example of IM popularity is the aforementioned Carnegie book which has sold over 16 million copies to date, been translated into every imaginable language, and generated a whole network of training courses and centres which are patronized by some 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies. Corporations such as KPMG, Coopers & Lybrand, Ernst & Young, and Price Waterhouse employ image consultants to instruct their employees in the art of looking, acting and sounding professional [29].

6. PROJECTS AS THEATRE

"All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify". Here Goffman [17] argues that behaviour can be observed as a process of people relating to each other as actors who enact roles, and that meaning is not a characteristic of the world, rather it is the result of an evolving social process of interaction. Even the notion of self is derived and sustained through interaction. Further, he argues that everyday interaction can be seen as processes that involve actors and spectators giving and receiving impressions about who they are and what they claim to be.

The organisational environment already contains much of what could be recognizable as theatre [30]; role plays in professional development workshops, cabarets at Christmas parties, award banquets, sales and marketing presentations, AGM's. In the context of PM, each project takes place on a stage with actors, costumes (uniforms), scripts, and props. Traditionally we make the assumption that it is the actor that is the fulcrum of the role, stage, costume, script, and props. A memetic approach considers the memes to be the creative force, constructing the actor, stage, and so on, as a consequence of their replication.

6.1. The project stage

Typically project briefings or meetings are played before an audience of workers and/or stakeholders. Traditionally the stage is set either as the project manager's office (liberally decorated with Gantt charts), or the conference room, employing a prop such as a data projector to display a Gantt chart amidst the obligatory pre-shaped PowerPoint (PPT) slides.

I suggest that the interview for a project manager takes place on a stage. Here a candidate will claim the identity of a project manager as a way of influencing how others will treat them in the future. The impression of such an identity may be created in a variety of ways, by claiming responsibility for the success of projects that appear on their résumé [31], wearing a business suit, citing credentials, and liberally using PM terms in conversation.

6.2. Project manager clothes

Men have evolved a standard uniform for the business environment that consists of the business suit. Part of the strategy used by men to climb executive ranks is to reflect the values by mimicking the dress, as well as the hobby and luncheon habits, of those executives already in the upper ranks [32].

Uniforms of all types, including the business suit, ask to be taken seriously, with suggestions of probity and virtue (clergy, robed judge), expertise (paramedics, airline pilots, consultants), trustworthiness (scouts, post carriers), courage (police officers, fire-fighters), obedience (military, high schools, corporations), extraordinary cleanliness and sanitation (ice cream vendors, hospital personnel) [33]. In the workplace image, appearance and dress are extremely important [34].

To survive socially project managers need to identify themselves from other workers, and they seek to do this by the clothes and badges they wear. A brief internet search of the websites of major PM professional institutes shows a plethora of business suits, some women but mostly men, and some wearing business suits *and* hardhats. Badges are more subtly displayed. Almost all PM professional body membership categories entitle members to use post-nominals. Additional post-nominals are also available to practitioners who successfully complete a professional certification program. Survey data of PM practitioners shows that those with PM post-nominals have a higher income than those without [35]. Such a string of credentials on a business card, offered by an individual wearing a business suit who appears well versed in PM terminology, presents a compelling façade of independent expertise that appears to survive well in Western corporate culture.

6.3. Project Manager scripts

Project managers are bound into a social system that demands acting behaviour from them. Throughout their working day project managers are required to present short plays or scenes with a script that depicts them as organized, in control, and

professional. Hodgson [15] observed that this is particularly true when project managers present to senior management, or when their professionalism is being questioned, or they want to differentiate themselves from competing groups within the organization. However, among themselves project managers behave with clear antagonism towards their own displays or 'acts' of professionalism [15]. Hodgson [15] observed that the humour amongst practitioners reflects the difficulty they have in matching their expected professional identity with their actual everyday performance when immersed in the complexity and unpredictability of project work.

The nature of the role of project manager requires the individual to construct or protect their professional identity. Such self-presentation behaviour is a common (though reluctantly acknowledged) phenomena in the organisational environment [36]. It is reluctantly acknowledged because it has connotations of being pretentious, deceitful, immoral, and manipulative. Project information is therefore 'packaged' by the project manager to acquire or support a desired identity. When a project manager considers the packaging, it is interesting to note that in social situations individuals regard a greater level of accountability associated with being untruthful rather than being evasive [37]. Rather than being caught in a lie when protecting identity, individuals create a different frame of reference that diverts attention to other topics and contexts [17]. This IM behaviour is more familiarly called bullshitting [38]. Remember it is the PM_BOK Code that is driving this behaviour as a means of surviving and replicating.

6.4. Project Manager Props

The Gantt chart has memetically much in common with PPT. PPT has been described as a social instrument, like a suit of clothes that the user imposes on other people and insists on being judged by it [39]. PPT is undoubtedly a successful meme being found on some 250 million computers around the world with over 30 million PPT presentation made every day. It pre-shapes (via templates) how users plan, present, and think about information, shepherding the user towards a staccato summarizing frame of mind [39], closing down debate instead of opening it up [40], and dumbing down content with potentially dangerous consequences [41]. The PPT slide sets the presenter's remarks in stone ahead of time, leaving no possibility for creative ideas to arise collaboratively.

The Gantt chart appears to be a successful meme. Project managers are compelled to create them to maintain their professionalism. Akin to PPT the Gantt chart leads its audience to believe that all the information required has been accounted for, giving the impression that the matter is solved. In this way strong Gantt charts close down creativity and spontaneity. It is simply not realistic to think that one can cram the complexity and unpredictability of project work into the limited template format of a Gantt chart. These charts are a physical manifestation of the information packaging process previously mentioned.

The PM_BOK Code is spreading profusely unchecked throughout Western culture. This particular type of PM appears to be an extremely successful meme. However, it must be remembered that memes are completely indifferent to their human host and care not for their welfare. Memes simply replicate and exploit their environment. As for the PM_BOK Code it prospers in a Western capitalist culture [9], and in this environment the competitive advantage is not given to human citizens, but to corporate ones.

7. THE TRAP

Weber [42] argued that the ethos, 'spirit', or fundamental values necessary for capitalistic activities is not inevitable, and that capitalism is a product of the Western mind that is significantly driven by the Protestant work ethic. This meme drives what Weber called the 'spirit of capitalism' which essentially underpins the dominant economic system of the world today. Capitalism is more than the accumulation of wealth. It is the application of a disciplined workforce and the regularized investment of capital [42], and requires a level of organization, pooling of capital, and economies of scale that can be achieved today principally by the application of social devices such as governments and predominantly corporations.

7.1. Corporation meme

The corporation meme is omnipresent and one of the most powerful actors in Western society. Its creation is relatively recent being a legal entity born out of the industrial revolution. Corporations were initially associations of people who requested a charter from the state legislature that provided them with a set of legal rights and responsibilities, particularly to serve the public good. The corporation was therefore a quasi-public device used by governments to create and administer public services like toll roads and canals and then it germinated within a system of stock markets, brokerage houses, and investment banks into a mechanism for the organization of railroads [43].

The American civil war and the industrial revolution created enormous growth in corporations and the lawyers representing corporations wanted more power to operate and wanted the constraints removed. A significant change happened to the corporate meme in 1886 when the United States Supreme Court first treated corporations as 'persons' entitled to constitutional liberties. This change concerned the Fourteenth Amendment which was passed at the end of the civil war to give equal rights to black people. The intention of the amendment was to prevent the States from taking away life, liberty or property from black people. However, lawyers acting for corporations reinterpreted this amendment arguing that corporations are also legal persons, and as such are also entitled to constitutional liberties. The Supreme Court supported this view, and in the periods between 1890 and 1910 the courts employed the Fourteenth Amendment in 19 race cases, in stark contrast with 288 corporate cases [44].

Corporate citizens are not like human citizens. The corporation personified is a special kind of person, designed by law only to

be concerned with their owners and shareholders (not stakeholders) who are not liable for its actions. Unlike humans, a corporation has an indefinite lifespan, virtual freedom of movement anywhere in the world, and controls mass media. Though there are many corporations that do good deeds in the community by producing goods and services that add value and make life easier, every chief executive officer (CEO) is bound by corporate legislature to place the interests of their owners above any other competing interests. The senior management of many organisations are equally concerned with environmental and sustainability issues as any eco-protector. However, CEO's are legally bound to put their bottom-line before anything else, even the public good.

Corporations eventually moved into the space of manufacturing, and many of these are the same giants that still dominate the economic landscape today. In this way the corporation altered manufacturing entities so that they were each owned by many people instead of by single individuals as had previously been the case.

The corporation continues to be redesigned by the memes of capitalism. The positive is flexibility, the negative confusion. In a 'one size fits all' approach the West is applying the corporate model almost everywhere including voluntary organisations, universities, and schools where students are viewed as customers and stakeholders. Technology has enabled investors to move capital across the globe from corporation to corporation without any intention of them becoming long-term owners of these businesses. Investors such as these are neither concerned with the profitability of the business. All they seek is a sudden increase in share price. These price increases often occur because a corporation re-shapes its business plan. This so-called "impatient capital" has radically changes the way corporations are managed [45]. Even the employment of a consultant to redesign a business sends a signal to the market that a corporation is in the game, flexible, and prepared to newly perform [45]. Interestingly, only the impression of redesign is required.

The project construct allows a corporation to adjust its business to the markets. One downside of such perpetual changing work roles is that craftsmen are no longer produced. Few spend long enough time on a task to master the art. Computer programmers exemplify this by spending much of their time being pulled from one task in one project to another in a different project. It appears that today people need to be masters of quick study, and study just long enough to do a reasonable job before moving on to another [45]. One of the features in contemporary economic system is to impose a flexible labour market. Efficiency increases if the workforce is insecure, and one of the costs of job insecurity to individuals is decrease job satisfaction and increase physical symptomatology [46, 47]

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I have presented the case that PM is prevalent in Western society because it is a successful impression

management script in a Western capitalist culture. Furthermore, that PM is evolving in a toxic manner that will eventually fractionalize the workforce to the benefit of the corporations and to the detriment of society. In short, PM in the main is more about appearance than productivity, and corporations will reap more benefit from it than people.

Work is very real to humans. The way we manage and organize it should benefit us and our dependants. I am calling for a reformation to the PMBOK® Guide version of PM in a way that relieves practitioners from performativity, and opens project work up to more creative and democratic processes

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