Creativity and Innovation in Project Management

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Where does creativity fit in?
Is there room for creativity and innovation within Project Management?

My goal is to explain the key ways that creativity and innovation can be used to differentiate you as a PM, advance your career, increase your effectiveness and transform you into a *Project Hero* instead of merely a Project Manager!

First a WARNING: This is one of those ‘soft’ Project Management topics. It does not deal with ‘hard’ content. I will not be mentioning equations, methodologies, formulas or process diagrams. This subject involves the softer concepts, such as attitude, behavior, enthusiasm and ideation. Hopefully I still can provide some concrete examples and suggestions to help plant the seed so that you can begin to incorporate these strategies into your day to day PM role. I will include examples and techniques within key PM process areas where creativity can be extremely valuable.

Creativity and innovation are rare in the field of Project Management. For example, if you look at an organization as a whole, it is within IT that you are likely to find the most structured, logical, and ‘left brained’ people. Then if you consider the entire IT department, my observation is that Project Managers are frequently the most organized, disciplined, and structured resources within IT. I like to call it *the left of the left brained* population!

OK class, please take out your textbook (in this case the PMBOK) and turn to the chapter on creativity… I’m still waiting. OK, instead turn to the chapter on innovation. This is not a topic that has been entertained by the Project Management Institute and covered within the ‘official’ Body of Knowledge.
Creativity and Project Management are almost like oil and water. They don’t mix well! My goal within this paper is to combine those ingredients in a jar, put a lid on that jar, and shake it around for a while to see how well we can combine the two.

I am very interested in the subject of what makes an excellent Project Manager, as compared to a merely average project manager. What can differentiate you from other PM’s within your organization / PMO? Is your career advancing as fast as you would like? Are you ‘asleep at the wheel’ in your career? How can you position yourself so that you are the one who is next in line for a promotion, or so that you are the one moved into executive leadership. The most recognized certification for Project Managers is the PMP. The second P of PMP stands for ‘Professional’. We are pros! Creativity can be what sets you apart from others, creates demand for your services, and accelerates your career growth.

How do you picture yourself as a Project Manager? Do you picture yourself as a boring middle manager, attending meetings, and pushing papers and approvals? Are you a ‘pointy haired boss’ or an empty shirt? How are you viewed by others? Are you a robot just mindlessly performing repetitive tasks every day? Are you stagnating in your career?

We need to think of ourselves as leaders! Leadership is what is valuable and badly needed within the PM ranks. I like the term Project Hero. It’s much more exciting to tell your kids that’s what you do rather than explain Project Management. Someone that can take a failing project and turn it around. Or someone who can steer a massive project, avoid risks, and destroy issues. Someone that is the leader of the team, that people want to follow and believe in. Someone who inspires and motivates!
Cons of Creativity

Now before I get into specific situations where creativity and innovation are useful, I want to cover the drawbacks and problems that can be encountered when trying to wield creativity within Project Management situations. I will not say that being creative is *always* the answer! It is not a silver bullet.

**Do not be so creative in your activities that you no longer are performing the role of Project Manager.** The PMBOK defines the boundaries of what is and what is not Project Management. It defines the boundaries between the PM role and other roles such as Human Resources for example. If you are constantly doing ‘creative’ tasks you may be wandering away from Project Management into other roles. I am advocating performing the role of Project Manager as defined by the PMBOK and applying creativity to that. Sometimes an organization may make the deliberate choice to have you perform multiple roles, which can be fine if it is recognized and understood as a conscious choice. Be careful not to use creativity as your excuse to perform Quality Control, or Business Analysis on an IT project, for example. Or, do not use it as an excuse to wander unknowingly into performing Safety Compliance within a construction project.

**It can be frustrating if every document is ‘creative’ and looks different.** There are benefits to standards and consistency. It can be confusing if every document is a creative, one of a kind document, and is not familiar to project stakeholders. It can be a waste of time to constantly be reinventing the wheel, and starting with a blank piece of paper every time you create a document. This is taking innovation and creativity overboard, and can indicate that you are going too far with trying to force creativity on everything.

**If you go overboard with creativity the result is no longer recognizable as Project Management.** This is my blanket warning that there can be too much of a good thing when it comes to applying creativity to the field of Project Management.

When and where to be creative as a PM

Now that we have gotten the dire warnings and bad news out of the way, I will review the processes within Project Management where Creativity and Innovation can be a valuable tool to enhance your performance and differentiate yourself.
**Communication** Communication is a huge part of Project Management and Creativity can enhance your communication and improve its effectiveness.

One way to be clear with communication is through effective use of colors, charts, and pictures to communicate concepts visually. Remember the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. I liberally sprinkle these types of visualizations in my project communications. Another way to effectively communicate is to be clear and to the point. Use a one page document for almost everything. If you make a particularly useful observation or argument, but it is tucked into the 5th page of a status report, it will be missed and lose effectiveness. Trust me, on almost any document (almost) no one is reading it word for word. (Certainly not Sr. Management!) Use a one page executive summary. Communicating clearly and not obfuscating your point is a form of leadership. A company I used to work for went through an exercise of recreating all of their document templates to be one page long.

An example that proves the point of the current state of creativity within Project Management is the ‘Stop light View’. It is now common to see a green/yellow/red view on status reports. But to some PM’s even incorporating this allegory was a major step out of their comfort zone. I think the stop light is a good start, it instantly communicates information, but how can we go even farther? What are some other possible symbols or images that would communicate something about project status? For example: How about flames for a project in trouble, a finish line for a project that is completing, a road block for a stuck project, or a smiley face for a positive status report?

How about being creative in the method of communication? There are many new technical tools out there to aid in communication. When you sent an email and did not hear back from someone, did you call them, walk by their desk, or text them too? If it is urgent or critical did you try sitting on the hood of their car and waiting for them at the end of the day?

**Presentations** are a form of communication. One creative technique I use is to have my PowerPoint with no (zero) bullet points. I will pick an image that conveys the concept I am trying to communicate in a memorable way. How often are bullets overused, or the audience immediately begins reading the presentation or handouts and not paying attention to the speaker?
Or worse, the presenter reads the bullets to the audience. How many famous or memorable speeches have been accompanied by PowerPoint presentations with bullets?

**Meetings** are the containers in which a lot of project management is performed. The over-use of meetings, and the prevalence of boring meetings within the corporate world is legendary. This can be a great opportunity to use creativity to navigate these waters even more successfully.

Try varying the meeting location. Hold a meeting outside, have a walking meeting. Go ‘off-site’. For an agile software development project at my company I held the daily stand-up meetings on the roof, outside, through the winter. Believe me, we got to a cadence of getting through these meetings quickly due to the creative location and conditions.

Sometimes creative techniques are the best for keeping a meeting on track. It is very common for meetings to get off track, and then not accomplish the goals of the meeting. This can be very frustrating to all who attend. Sometimes, even if you have to be a bit harsh or abrupt, if you keep meetings on task it will be appreciated. Sometimes I will ‘throw the flag’ if someone goes off track, or tries to cover something that has been taken off line. I literally mean ‘throw the flag’, as I have a yellow football penalty flag in my laptop bag, that I will toss on the conference room table. This usually gets a few laughs, but also makes the point to stay focused.

I like the analogy of ‘running across a frozen pond’, where if there is a limited time to cover a broad subject, I will say that we have to run across the pond, and not stand still in one place too long, or else we will fall through the ice.

**Team motivation and rewards** It is very important to keep a team motivated, and providing individual recognition or celebrating small team successes can be a great place for creativity. Something that is slightly different from the ‘usual’ can be greatly appreciated. What are some creative ideas that you have seen for rewards and recognition? At my company, they hold an annual fun day, and last year among other activities it
included the opportunity to ride in a hot air balloon or go ‘skeet’ shooting.

**Project Hygiene** I like to describe all of the small team member responsibilities such as entering their time sheets, completing status reports, and tracking task completion as *Project Hygiene*. Some companies are great at this and it all gets done on time, and in other environments you have to constantly hound people to complete these ‘hygiene’ tasks. It can be quite a drag if you are constantly having to hound people or escalate these items. This can be another area where creativity can be very effective for improvement. On one project I implemented the ‘donut criteria’ which was a metric that I would set at the weekly status meeting. If it was met (such as all status reports completed on time) then I would provide donuts at the next meeting. Then I would change the donut criteria slightly each week, just to keep people engaged.

**Food** This is another area where creativity can be very beneficial to a Project Manager. Get creative with food, don’t settle for bringing in pizza again! Advice that I always give to new project managers is that my performance reviews, feedback and demand for me as a PM is in direct correlation to the quality of the food that I provide to the project team! Learn this early in your career and you will go places!

**Project Issues and Risks** This is an area where creativity can really set a PM apart and lead to greater project success. The cliché is to think outside the box. But truly, are there creative or unconventional ways to resolve a project issue or avoid getting caught up in a major issue? Perhaps part of this ‘creativity’ can be traced to a PM’s insistence to not take no for an answer. Not allowing an issue to come up and derail a project.
Creativity can be useful in avoiding risks and resolving issues, but it can also be a useful skill in communicating risks to project sponsors and triggering action. One project I was on was two weeks away from go-live, and there was a ton of risk. There were too many defects in the system, untested code, not all training had been delivered. We were headed for a disaster. I called a meeting with the project business owner and said in the meeting that the purpose of the meeting was to write a letter to our customers. We needed to write the letter to our customers apologizing for how bad the service was due to our project implementation. I asked if we needed to print 1,000 or 10,000 copies of the letter to send out to all of our customers. This got their attention to the severity of the project situation.

If a project is going to fail, what have you got to lose?

**Tools** Are you being creative with the tools you use for project management? Are you still using the same basic PM tools that you were 5, or 10 years ago? Are you stagnating? I would say, be creative, adapt or die! Do you still listen to music on a Sony Walkman Portable Tape Deck?

If I could make one recommendation for a tool to introduce into your tool-box it would be mind mapping. This will instantly improve your creative “street credibility”. A mind mapping tool is a great vehicle for creative activity, and is useful for such PM situations as: meeting agendas, scope planning, note taking, presentations, brainstorming and numerous other occasions.

**Job Search** Is it taboo to mention a job search? This is another area where it is critical to differentiate yourself from others and stand out from the crowd. How will your resume get picked out of a stack of 20? Or 50? I have tried to apply some of these principles to my Resume. It is one page long. (No one is reading a 3+ page resume!) It also includes a Gantt Chart, 6 pictures, and a mind map. I am not sure that this resume will guarantee me a job or even an interview, but I am sure that it is noticed.
Conclusion
Although creativity is a rare attribute for a PM, it is something that can be very beneficial to making you more effective, more successful and differentiating yourself.

Avoid stagnation. Grow your career. Adapt or die! Be prepared to be a unique and different PM. Become a Leader. Become a Project Hero!