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The inspired Project Manager

By Ammar Mango

I would like to make an appeal, as follows: My dear fellow project managers, please consider, once in a while, the need to stop thinking.

This is not an attention grabber. I do mean what I said literally.

Project Managers might take exception to such a statement. We are in a profession that values thinking. We are actually taught to think about what we are going to do before we do it. This is common sense wisdom.

In planning, we are taught to think the project through...in a way, simulate the whole project, in our minds, on paper, and in project management and other simulation software. Best practices show us how to do the calculations for the schedule development, cost estimates, and control. Also, we need to “think” about how we will deal with the project risk, the different stakeholders, the hurdles we are facing. It sure looks like it is always “think - think – think” for a project manager.”

However, this thinking that is supposed to help us do our job better can become a problem if overdone. Sometimes as project managers we cannot and do not know how to stop thinking.

While this might look OK at the surface, a closer look might reveal a few problems in all this thinking. We are all too familiar with some of these problems. The stress that can come from too much thinking, and the loss of the big picture view when a project manager keeps thinking about the minute details of the project.

I would like to bring your attention to another serious issue caused by this excessive thinking, if I may call it, that project managers sometimes get caught into. It is the fact that thinking, believe it or not, can stifle the creative process. How? You might ask? Most of the thinking we do in our project management processes is analytical thinking. There is not much creativity in calculating a cost estimate, setting up a baseline, calculating a schedule, or even breaking down a WBS component. We follow procedures. However, little innovation is involved. Basically, a project manager takes a group of inputs, analyzes them and uses different techniques to generate outputs. The outputs are usually a new representation of existing data. There is not much new in the output.

This can be a major problem given that a project manager needs to be more than just the analytical thinker for the project. The project manager is a leader who should inspire and be inspired. Remember that the PMBOK states that the purpose of a project is: “to create a new product, service, or result.”

Notice that the process of analytical thinking on its own will hardly ever result in new ideas which we probably need to create something new.

Project managers need inspiration and creativity. Not everything can depend on analytical thinking. Creativity is greatly needed in solving project problems, motivating the team, influencing stakeholders, and decision making.

You do not have to take my word for it. One of the most creative geniuses of modern times is Einstein. Interestingly enough, he has implied that his best ideas were not a result of intensive analytical thinking but more of an inspiration. An idea flashes in his mind and then he elaborates on it using analytical thinking.

If we go back further in time, we find out that another icon of creativity; Archimedes shouted Eureka when he was inspired with an answer to a major problem he was contemplating for a long time. The idea did not come to him while solving complex equations. Interestingly enough, the story goes that the idea flashed in his mind while stepping into the bath tub to take a bath.

Many of us might testify to this fact. A new idea is usually an inspiration. It is like a flash that overwhelms the mind, then the mind takes it and processes it and goes through its intricate details. But the idea itself is not a result of heavy thinking. It is as if there is an outside force that plants that creative idea in our mind. It is indeed inspiration.

I spent some time looking for a definition of inspiration. Most that I found were based on theology. Others were related to icons of inspiration. But one of the definitions that might fit the context here is one that defines it as: "Arousal of the mind to unusual activity or creativity."

Lots of research has been done on the subject of creativity, inspiration, and where great ideas come from. A recent study by scientists at Drexel and Northwestern universities revealed that the mind needs to be ready for creative ideas for them to occur. These ideas are generated from brain activity different than that resulting in methodical thinking.

As the plot thickens, we might start wondering about how feasible is it to build our creative abilities. If these ideas are not the result of thinking, then maybe they are out of our control. So, does that mean we cannot become more creative. Luckily that it not true. However, one thing is for sure, we cannot become more creative through more intense analytical thinking or reprocessing of the data.

The big question is: how can the mind be aroused to the level of creativity or inspiration? So, how can we build our ability to be creative? If project management processes from the PMBOK cannot generate that much creativity from the project manager or the team, then we need to come up with new ways of looking at old problems to find genuine, original ways of solving problems and exploiting opportunities.

If we cannot find inspiration in the PMBOK, where can we find it?

Can stepping into the bath tub, like Archimedes, be the answer?

Scientists, experts, as well as ancient wisdom brought forward many different ways to stimulate our minds to be ready to generate great ideas. Recent studies have shown breathing, yoga, exercise, and prayer to help a person become more inspired. Other research has suggested that curiosity, perseverance, having an eager want, challenging traditional wisdom, and challenging unquestionable assumptions, all help us become more inspired.

Wise people of ancient times have also shed light on this creative process. Many of them point to the need for the human mind to be still, to become more inspired. While this is counterintuitive, it actually works. Do you notice that your best ideas come to you while you are relaxing, and trying to forget your projects? All of a sudden a problem you have been thinking about for weeks, seems so easy with a sudden inspiration that goes through your mind.

Why do we get this inspiration and sometime we do not? Maybe because most of the time we over think problems. We try to be too smart for our own good.

Maybe left to its own nature, a mind can receive inspirations much better than if we try to over clutter it with our analytical thinking process. Maybe we need to step aside and allow our minds to be inspired.

I am not saying we should stop thinking altogether. Going back to the Archimedes example, he must have thought about his problem for a while, and was determined to find a solution. He was determined to find a solution. Then the inspiration came when he was ready and at a moment of probably relaxation rather than intense thinking.

The idea is to break the cycle of analytical thinking with periods of contemplation, meditation, relaxation and deep breathing, to allow ourselves a chance to get creative and inspired ideas.

So, once in a while, try to stop thinking. Stop thinking about the solution. Stop analyzing all possible options and their potential outcomes. Stop weighing the pros and cons of everything. Try to draw a blank. Cool down that train of thought. Let it rest. Do not be impatient. Just let it go and you will have a better chance of coming up with a genuine solution than if you engage yourself in too much thinking.

And next time you face a challenge, instead of saying “let me think about it for a while,” try to say these words: “ let me stop thinking about it” and give yourself a chance to be inspired.

Think about it....or don't.

Thank you!

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