Personal Skills and Personality Development in Project Management Training: As they apply to Germany

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Abstract: The discourse on the requirements for project managers is analyzed from the perspective of personality research and some implications for evolving a theory for developing project managers' personality and for project management training are discussed.

Introduction

Project management is a complex, creative and innovative task. It aims at developing innovative products and services and requires project managers who are prepared to assume responsibility for leading a project team, a client and complex processes. (Nixon et al. 2012)

In Germany a wide range of project management training measures and an internationally accepted certification model are offered, for example, by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Projektmanagement e.v.(German Registered Association for Project Management)[15]. It aims at teaching project management methods, tools and special skills e.g. moderation and presentation, negotiations and communication skills.

A recent empirical study analyzed current training methods in two medium-sized companies in Germany and has concluded that current training measures are sophisticated as far as teaching methods are concerned: Discussions, exchange of experience with examples taken from participants' work places and role plays provide project managers with adequate preparation so that they are in a position to apply project management methods in a daily (project) routine. However, the study also shows that project managers' performance strongly depends on their personal skills and personality (Palt 2013). Interestingly, the training methods analyzed do not appear to contribute to strengthening personal skills and personality development. Hence, one of the problems is that they are mainly discussed in the context of business administration. Furthermore, the discourse is normative and limited to recommending training to strengthen the personality but without describing how.

Against this background the paper considers the following research question: What training is needed to enhance the development of personal skills and strengthen the personality in order to improve project managers' performance? Relevant questions are: Which personal skills are needed? To what extent can these be learned by project managers? How do personal skills and personality develop? What kind of training is required to strengthen personality development?

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[15] Retrieved September 21, 2013 from http://www.gpm-ipma.de/startseite.html

Based on these questions the paper aims at providing a theoretical framework for personality development in project leader training in the following steps: In a first step the current state of research on the requirements for project managers and on personal skills will be presented. This will be followed by considering to what extent personal skills are determined or can be learned. Here the perspective of scientific anthropology will be taken into account. Thirdly, based on specific categories of personality development (shared by scientific anthropology and pedagogical research) such as learning from experience, social relationship learning and unconscious/informal learning will be discussed as crucial elements of personality development. Finally all these perspectives will be combined in a framework for understanding the possibilities presented by project management and for project management training concepts that strengthen personal skills and personality development. Thus, an attempt will be made to outline some cornerstones of a theory for developing and training personality.

Requirements for Project Managers and Project Management Training – the Current State of Research in Business Administration

Companies require project managers that are able to face the challenges of complex, creative and innovative projects. However, the latter must also be prepared to assume responsibility for leading a project team successfully. Since the late 1960s when project management became an organizational instrument in Germany, the skills required by project managers, in particular decision-making, teambuilding, communication, conflict management and negotiating skills (e.g. Brings 1976; Ford & Randolph 1992) have been continually under discussion. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that managing a project differs from managing an enterprise; put succinctly, a project is organized according to a time schedule to achieve an objective.

Quite early in the scientific discourse the role of project managers was described in detail. In most publications, however, it is stated that training is required that teaches project managers methods, their role and the behavior expected of them as project managers. Kolodny (1988) assumes that project management can only be trained to a certain extent because it greatly depends on the personality of the project manager. However, these observations have never been substantiated, either by theoretical or empirical studies in the context of project management or project management training. Consequently, there is countless literature on management that describes project management methods and features practical tips and instructions for implementation. Some empirical studies focus on the need for process optimisation in matrix-organizations (e.g. Bartlett & Ghoshal 1990). Others discuss business expertise. Recent project management literature acknowledges the impact of leadership on project management success (e.g. Nixon et al. 2012). It is only rarely that the personality of project managers is addressed (e.g. Wastian et al. 2009). Moreover, in one empirical study, department managers and project managers mentioned some traits that – as will be seen later - strongly depend on the personality: resistance to stress, good relationships and persuasive skills and empathy. (Palt 2014) Adžić (2006), in his qualitative empirical study, addresses the need for personality development and still demands training to bring about a change in behavior and stresses the need for properly recruiting project managers who are capable of fulfilling their role. However, the continuing demand for training is surprising. There has been no analysis of the extent to which project management training actually contributes to the personality development of project managers. In fact, there is a lack of research as to which kind of training would be appropriate to generating personal project management skills.

Some Implications from Personality Research

Psychological and neurobiological personality research opens up a promising new perspective and a new contextualization of project management training. At first sight, the everyday experiences made by companies seem to confirm Kolodny's statement that the personality of a project manager plays a significant role: "Für einige ist die Ambiguität der Aufgabe ein Lebenselexier, eine Gelegenheit zu blühen und zu gedeihen, eine Rolle zu schaffen, die besser zu ihnen paßt als alles, was eine hierarchische Organisation ihnen jemals bieten kann. Für andere ist dies ein Desaster." (For some project managers the complex task of leading a project is their life-blood; it gives them the chance to flourish, to create a role that suits them better than any other post can ever afford them in a hierarchical organization. For others it is an absolute disaster.) (Kolodny 1988, p. 40) Empirical findings show, however, that (project) managers are not convinced that this role can be learned in the course of professional training (Palt 2013; 2014). But from the perspective of personality research there are indications that some personal traits do exist that afford a better chance of learning the role. Therefore, a theoretical debate is needed to correlate the requirements for project managers and theories about personality development and learning:

Personality research deals with personal traits and the question as to how far these can change. Although it can be observed that the definitions of personality differ depending on the tradition and the area of research, constancy and stability are described as common features of personality in the sense of a constant pattern of feeling, thinking and behavior. Moreover, there is a broad consensus in the discourse of personality research that regardless of the model we choose to describe the personality there is a bundle of constant personality traits (Costa & McRae 1990). There is no doubt that personality traits develop beyond the age of thirty and stability increases until the age of about fifty has been reached (Asendorpf 2012).

Based on the empirically approved theories of personal psychology and neurobiological personality research it can be concluded, that the theoretical assumption in business administration that the role of a project manager can be learned must be analyzed in a more differentiated way. If we refer for example to the Five-Factor-Model that Costa & McRae developed as a "hierarchical organization of personality traits in term of five basic dimensions: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience" with the aim of providing it as a base for individual assessment and for further studies in personality psychology (McRae & John 1992, p. 175) and compare these characteristics with the requirements for project managers in the theoretical discourse in business administration, it can be concluded that some traits are favorable for learning to be a good project manager (Table no. 1:). But still the question remains as to how these can be developed:

	FIVE FACTORS				
	NEUROTI-CISM	EXTRA-VERSION	OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE	AGREEABLE-NESS	CONSCIENTO USNESS
	• Anxious • Self-pitying • Tense • Touchy • Unstable • Worrying	• Active • Energetic • Enthusiastic • Outgoing • Talkative	• Artistic • Curious • Imaginative • Insightful • Original • Wide interest	• Appreciative • Forgiving • Generous • Kind • Sympathetic • Trusting	• Efficient • Organized • Planful • Reliable • Responsible

					• Thorough
REQUIRE-MENTS FOR PROJECT MANA-GERS	• Resistance to stress • Factual and solution-oriented handling of conflicts	• Good personal relationship • Team-building-skills and team orientation • Leaderships skills • Communication skills • Negotiating skills • Decision making skills	• Creativity • Innovation skills	• Persuasive skills • Conflict manage-ment skills • Ability to empathise • Good relationship skills	• Sense of responsibility • Goal orientation • Efficient working • Goal oriented work • Ability to plan

Table 1: Author's own compilation using data from: McRae & John 1992; Palt 2014 and chapter 2 of this study

Crucial Elements of Personality Development

The discourse in neurobiological personality research that reflects the empirically approved theories of personal psychology and consistently assumes that between 20 and 50 percent of personal traits are genetically determined and can hardly be changed after the age of three years (e.g. Roth 2003), should be taken into account. Apart from the fact that neurobiological research has focused on early childhood, recent research underlines the plasticity of the brain. Based on new research on the interconnectedness of the neural links in the brain some neurobiological learning theories have been developed recently (e.g. Brand & Markowitsch 2008; Roth 2008) that support the assumption that personality develops by learning by repetition, unconscious learning, by learning in a social context and by (reflected) experience.

On the one hand, as far as the requirements from the neurobiological perspective are concerned, it is important to organize and structure the information from the teacher's point of view. From the learner's point of view it is important to pay attention to the things that we want to learn in order to ensure the transfer from the short-term memory to the long-term memory, to repeat them and form routines (Brand & Markowitsch 2008). With regard to personality traits, however, unconscious learning, learning in a social context and learning from reflected experience play a major role. The limbic system is the center of emotions, drives, impulses, and subconscious decision-making. It is our central evaluation system that saves our evaluations in the emotional memory: "Dieses System entscheidet insofern grundlegend über den Lernerfolg. Dies geschieht überwiegend aufgrund der vergangenen, meist unbewusst wirkenden Erfahrung. Kommt das System zu einem positiven Ergebnis, so werden… in der Großhirnrinde vorhandene Wissens-Netzwerke so umgestaltet, dass neues Wissen entsteht." (This system is fundamentally responsible for the success of our learning which occurs mainly due to experiences in the past which mostly have a subconscious effect. If the system comes to a positive conclusion, the knowledge networks present in the cerebral cortex are rearranged so that new knowledge arises.) (Roth 2008, p. 63)

However, the implicit assumption for professionalization that project management can be learned by current training measures appears to be an excessively technical approach that is insufficient. In order to develop the traits that are deeply rooted in one's personality, there is a need to

integrate the implications from the discourse on personality research in psychology and neurobiology.

A first step could be to make a clearer distinction between formal training that provides a knowledge base on project management tools and methods on the one hand and non-formal educational instruments, e.g. coaching, mentoring and training on the job that facilitate non-formal and informal learning, on the other. Moreover, for developing a theoretical framework for personality development and new configurations of project management training it would be useful to connect with some educational research, e.g. concerning learning from experience, from mistakes (e.g. Göhlich & Wulf 2007) and organizational learning (Schiersmann 2000 with a special focus on organizational learning in projects). Thus, research on new configurations of project management training could be connected with the discourse on informal learning based on experience and reflection (e.g. Guelalli 2009). In this respect, it is advisable to include educational research on personality and personality development based on personality psychology theories, e.g. regarding the 'Five-Stage-Model from 'novice' to 'expert' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1987) and its discussion in the context of educational research (e.g. Gruber & Palonen 2007).

Against this background it becomes clear that there is a need to develop non-formal training measures that are based on experience gained on-the-job and guided by experienced superiors and supervisors with the aim of helping project managers to reflect on their informal learning processes and experiences, e.g. by training-on-the job, mentoring and coaching.

Findings and Perspectives

The main findings clearly show: In particular, contrary to discourse formations in business administration on requirements for project managers that explicitly focus on project management as an organizational and technical procedure, the analysis shows clearly that it is implicit in learning processes that emphasis is placed on the personality of the project managers involved and less on technology. At this point an ambivalent discourse in business administration reveals and suggests, on the one hand, that project management can be learned by current training measures and, on the other hand, relies on the personality und thus innate personality traits and actions.

Moreover, the analysis shows that the discourses mainly convey a functional learning theory, that, to put it bluntly, replaces personality with technology and thereby marks the limits of educational potential. The findings are discussed against the background of the discourse on personality psychology and neurobiology whereby some cornerstones of a theory for developing project managers' personality are illustrated that are explicitly based on learning theories. Moreover, based on the categories unconscious learning, learning in social context and learning by experience some non-formal crucial elements of personality have been discussed that should be taken into account in developing some training concepts for project managers that focus on their individual personal traits and, foster personality development. A problem is, however, that in companies there is a lack of experience with rather new-fangled non-formal training tools such as mentoring and informal learning. They seem to feel uncomfortable with non-formal training tools because these tools are highly individualized. Besides, the return on investment cannot be clearly defined.

However, companies in particular suffer from the gap between research and practice. Therefore, there is a need for further research and for new concepts of personality development (in continuing educational training).

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