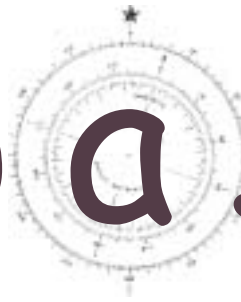




# Compass



VOLUME 8, NUMBER 1



## The State of the Art

by David A. Schmaltz

*"An artist is his own fault." John O'Hara*

On a recent airing of the NPR program *Fresh Air*, Terry Gross interviewed the late actress and acting teacher Uta Hagen. About five minutes into the interview, as Gross asked how Hagen prepared for a role, Hagen interrupted her.

"Are you an actress?" she asked.

"Well, no," stammered the interviewer.

"Then it's none of your business!" replied the actress.

Hagen went on to passionately explain that the details of how an artist prepares and performs inevitably degrade into meaningless exposition for all but artists. Those who attend theater performances don't understand that they can't understand these things. They might aspire to know, but the descriptions can have no meaning for them.

Hagen continued, explaining that most people believe they could perform if they only knew the tricks

of the trade. This, she said, is hogwash. It's not about the tricks of the trade, which are meaningful only to those plying the trade—for whom they are not tricks at all, but deceptively small insights. The art is not the performance or the performer, but a deeply personal practice, which cannot be translated into any language except practice.

See our Website for what's new:  
[www.projectcommunity.com/whatsnew](http://www.projectcommunity.com/whatsnew)

PMI Fellow Russell D. Archibald recently posted an article titled "State of the Art of Project Management: 2003" [www.pmforum.org/library/papers04/state3pt11.htm](http://www.pmforum.org/library/papers04/state3pt11.htm), and his statement reminded me of Hagen's wise comments. Archibald's piece does not speak to the art of project management at all, but to the business of it. It reads like a wealthy collector describing the art business, not like the observations of any practicing artist. I have no complaints with Archibald's choice of focus. If Hagen's observations are true, an accurate description of the state of this art would have left all but practicing professionals unimpressed.

***"... there seems to be no end to the articles and books titled 'The Art of Project Management.'"***

Surprisingly little has been written about the art of project manage-

ment, though there seems to be no end to the articles and books titled "The Art of Project Management." We all seem to acknowledge that project work is an art, then degrade into conversations about the tricks or the business of the trade, as if they somehow represent the art. Any practicing professional artist will tell you otherwise.

While organizations engage in the business of project management to improve project performances by creating portfolio management infrastructures, project management offices, and PM certifications, the practicing professional quietly builds his personal practice unseen by the social architects surrounding him. New life-cycle models come and go, processes degrade and improve, and chief change officers are installed like new seats in an ancient theater. The performer, if she is an artist worth her salt, can perform anywhere, but the producers want an impressive backdrop for their world-class productions.

The result is often an impressive backdrop for far less than world-class performances, as those steeped only in the tricks of the trade and the business of the trade take the stage before ever

Continued ...

confronting the artist within themselves. These performers might remember their lines, but they produce no memorable performances.

## Producing Memorable Performances

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The state of any art differs from the state of that art's business. The state of the graphic art business reminds us that more velvet Elvis paintings are sold than all of the fine art prints produced. Does



this mean that every artist should focus upon producing velvet canvases?

The state of any art has never been defined by that art's business. The breakthrough techniques employed to produce ever cheaper Elvis paintings have no influence on the forward evolution of art, since art relies upon each individual artist's personal practice. We look to the script or the director without ever understanding the influence the mute spear carrier in the third scene of the second act had on the performance.

The truth reveals that each performer draws from a deeply per-

sonal practice when contributing to a memorable performance. The director understands that she must coordinate these personal skills into a coherent production. But without each performer's capability, little coherence emerges. The director pulls together these practices; she is not responsible for creating them. Without yeast, no amount of heat will make bread rise.

We expend more energy dressing up the theater than enhancing the real source of memorable performances. We train the project manager in the lore and culture of project coordination, assuming that he is capable of creating a coherent performance from thespians who have merely memorized their lines. When the players arrive from central casting with their scripts and their costumes—their roles and responsibilities—and little idea of the deeply personal practice they will be called upon to employ, a kindergarten orchestra-like production results. Even when the notes are correct, the performance becomes an ordeal for everyone involved.

We invest hardly anything in developing the artist within our projects' players. We lavishly spend developing the script but fail to inform individuals of their responsibilities for creating and maintaining the deeply personal practices required for coherent results. We waste our diligence when choosing our projects from the portfolio of possible productions. We train the director and expect the actors to perform without acknowledging this most essential responsibility.

## A Failure to Thrive

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The results appear as a failure to thrive. The producer doesn't need to understand that the first, essential requirement for every

memorable performance is not that the actors remember their lines, but that they achieve an invisible yet tangible coherence. The director understands that unless a community can emerge from her central casting rabble, no memorable performance will be possible. We read about plays that close before they open, but in the project world, once a performance starts, it's the devil's own work to shut it down, no matter how forgettable the performance.

Producers sit in the back of the audience, following the script, noting who screws up. The director exhorts. Would-be actors blow off their director's irrelevant-seeming exhortations, focusing upon remembering their lines, finding their marks, and changing their costumes, as if any of these actions would produce a memorable performance. The audience might not call the result incoherence, but they nod off in the second act.

## The Method Is Not the Practice

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I cannot blame the producers or the directors for this sorry state of affairs. What producer or director pays for her cast's acting lessons? The cast members, if they are to become actors, must assume responsibility for arriving already engaged with their personal practice.

Each project participant carries responsibilities beyond simply memorizing his lines, finding his marks, and carrying his props. It's no more the project manager's job to show you how to act than it is the director's job to teach an actor how to act. Whether she contributes by writing code or scheduling meetings, each must be responsible for developing her own deeply personal practice to fully contribute to a memorable performance—one so satisfying that, at the end, everyone wants to do another one like

it. Everyone on the stage must become an artist, and must ply this trade to properly deploy any other skill.

***Everyone on the stage must become an artist, and must ply this trade to properly deploy any other skill.***

Frantically learning my lines and woodenly staging my moves before expending the obligation, grateful only that it was over, I performed in a high school production. Project work, approached in this way, becomes an unending pursuit of the end to a suffering that never really ends. This is no way to live. I tried my hand at amateur performing, choosing another profession instead, only to learn later that I needed to understand this unsettling craft before I could meaningfully ply that trade.

This craft takes many forms. Some use coaches. Others attend "studios," where they develop the artist within them by working with other actors, using improvisations and bare-bones productions. They learn something new with every performance, confronting themselves again and again. A personal practice—one that encounters the scariest places within the self—emerges from this continual pursuit.

Those who have chided us for avoiding involvement with the XP, Agile, and Lean movements expected us to hop onto one or another of those bandwagons. Our question was and always has been, "What will people do once they take to these stages?" We find players performing in remarkably similar ways, whether the stage holds a waterfall, a spiral, or a high school production of the land-rush scene from *Oklahoma!* The choreography might change, but the deeply personal practice required from each performer remains essential, eter-

nal, and critical to any memorable result. The method is not the practice. Each script assumes an actor to perform it. Whether an actor capable of performing arrives becomes the defining element within every memorable performance.

***Whether an actor capable of performing arrives becomes the defining element within every memorable performance.***

True North helps those who never expected to assume these responsibilities. For those who aspired to become artists, resolving these challenges becomes almost second nature. The rest of us face different challenges. The state of the art of projects inevitably depends on the state of the artists involved more than the state of the business of the art. The quality of the artist within determines the real state of the art. das

***For more information on this subject, see our Heretics' Forum page: <http://pc.wiki.net/wiki.cgi?LettersToAnArtist>***



**Rediscovering Artistry**  
*"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." Pablo Picasso*

Life is not a paint-by-number exercise. Process and technique, directed by all of the management and leadership in the world can't prepare anyone for facing their own blank canvases. Every artist steps alone into her practice.

Most training gets this humbling reality bass-ackwards, telling even the leaders to follow some other leader's strategies for resolving very personal dilemmas. We've become a society of impersonators.

Gordon McKenzie, author of *"Orbiting the Giant Hair Ball"* recalls asking grade school children, "Who is an artist?" All kindergartners' hands confidently pop up. Barely half of the first graders' confess, and by third grade, only one or two artists remain. Where do they go?

Big sisters mock and teachers discourage until they take up painting by someone else's numbers, leaving an artist behind.

### **Absolutely Essential Training**

Training takes three forms: developing habits, acquiring techniques, and learning about learning. The first form imprints custom, certifying repeatability. The second form imparts methods for matching technique to situation, comparing results with correct answers. The third form regards blank canvases, encouraging individuals to consider how they learn.

No artist mistakes habit for discipline or tactic for judgment because neither resolve their essential dilemmas. Yet our work—our lives—continually challenge each of us in ways our habits and techniques ignore.

Our work requires answering essentially unanswerable questions which simple habit or remembered technique cannot resolve. This needn't be a solitary pursuit. Actors join studios. Painters share critique.

We've woven this perspective into each of our workshop offerings. Our *Beyond Leadership* experience, *Mastering Projects Workshop*, and *Mastering Project Work* workshop each present blank canvases upon which you rediscover the artistry essential for producing your own unique masterpieces.

***See how here.***





## The KROC Connection

©2004 by Mark G. Gray

*The following article, written by community-member Mark G. Gray, considers a real-world software process improvement effort.*

***"The real risk seems to be assuming that good standards, disciplined workers, and process maturity alone are enough for successful process improvement."***

When you name a software process improvement project KROC you have a lot of explaining to do. I have explained, repeatedly, that the name honors Ray Kroc, the father of the business-format franchise. Kroc made fast-food and business standards and processes key to McDonald's success; KROC will make software engineering and project management standards and processes key to our success.

Ray Kroc, a milkshake machine salesman in 1952, first encountered fast-food standards and processes when he made a sales call to the MacDonald's Hamburger Stand. The MacDonald brothers had developed standards and processes for food preparation, cooking, delivery, and sales that helped their workers make hamburgers quickly, efficiently, inexpensively, and identically. Their invention made workers smart, turning high school students into sous chefs, short-order cooks, servers, and cashiers. Kroc was so impressed that he convinced the MacDonald brothers to franchise their method to him.

Over the next dozen years Kroc developed business standards and processes that let anyone run a

McDonald's restaurant. His invention made franchisees smart, turning ordinary managers into Masters of Business Administration. When he purchased the rights to the name and concept from the MacDonald brothers and changed the name to McDonald's, he understood that he wasn't in their old business of selling fast-food. He had invented the new business of selling fast-food businesses.

The time was right for Kroc. His invention filled the entrepreneur's desire to own a business and the consumer's desire for reliable fast-food. Today 30,000 McDonald's franchises worldwide operate with discipline, standardization, order, cleanliness, attentiveness, and speed. Kroc's business-format franchise built the McDonald's empire and made him rich in the process.

Over the next few years KROC will develop a business-format franchise for our software projects. We don't intend to build an empire or make ourselves rich, but we do aim to enrich our operations with discipline, standardization, order, cleanliness, attentiveness, and speed. We want standards and processes that make our developers and managers smart; technology that turns feral developers into software engineers and feral managers into project managers.

***"We want standards and processes capable of making our developers and managers smart"***

The time is right for KROC. Our invention will fill our management's desire for Capability Maturity Model's level 3 projects and our customer's desire for higher quality code. Our management is still arguing over exactly what this means. The key question seems to be: "What standards and processes must management mandate to ensure quality?"

Given KROC's inspiration, I was shocked when our local McDonald's closed. The franchisee blamed the economic downturn from 9/11, but subsequent customer letters to the local newspaper described a disordered, dirty restaurant where inattentive workers produced sub-standard results. In short, their practice seemed to be everything that Ray Kroc's standards and processes wouldn't allow.

Kroc's formula for success didn't work here, and understanding why is important for KROC's risk management. Did my local McDonald's fail because of a lack of worker discipline? Are worker discipline and standardization sufficient for process improvement success?

### The Problem Isn't The Problem

Department of Defense workers are unquestionably among the most disciplined in the world, and their organization thrives on standardization. However, their efforts to standardize on a single programming language over the last thirty years have failed.

Studies from the early 1970s concluded that the DoD's use of a plethora of programming languages undermined efficiency, quality, and economy. So, their Higher Order Language Working Group collected requirements and produced specifications for a single language to resolve these problems. The initial specification for the language Ada was released in 1977, and in 1983 it became an ANSI standard.

In 1987 directive 3405.1 mandated the use of Ada for all software produced by or for the DoD; in 1991 Congress made the mandate federal law. The disciplined workforce, accustomed to following orders, responded with a flood of waiver requests. Most projects had some reason for using a lan-

guage other than Ada. A survey in 1995 revealed that fewer than a third of the lines of code used by the Department were written in Ada. When the directive was rescinded in 1997, many projects used other languages without applying for waivers.

The directive suspending the Ada mandate offers clues to its failure. It still recommends Ada as the language of choice, but weighs the "context of the system and software engineering factors" more heavily. I'm sure most of the disciplined workforce tried to use Ada, but found that in context it made them stupider, not smarter.

### **Our Coping Is The Problem**

Perhaps the Ada mandate failed because the field was too immature. Software development is much younger than either fast-food or business management. Perhaps the context of Ada, and by implication the context of KROC, is still too undeveloped to talk about standardization. How important is maturity in process improvement? That brings us to another example.

Accounting is one of our most mature practices. Its form is essentially unchanged since the development of double-entry bookkeeping in the 13th century. After 700 years of use surely its processes are mature enough to be standardized. And yet an accounting process improvement project, with a highly disciplined workforce, was one of the biggest failures of the 1990s.

In 1990 the United States Congress passed the Chief Financial Officers Act, requiring annual audits of government departments to ensure constitutionally mandated accountability of federal funds. Over several subsequent years, the Department of Defense attempted an audit, but of their dozen ac-

counting categories only the retirement account consistently passed. In one of the last audits attempted, DoD could only account for three of seven trillion dollars in transactions.

***"Accounting has remained essentially unchanged since the development of double-entry bookkeeping in the 13th century, yet an accounting process improvement project was one of the biggest failures of the 1990s."***

Congress's response? Initially, Congress annually waived DoD's audit requirements; finally, the Armed Services Committees permanently waived them. Their rationale? Everyone knew the problem and annual reminders weren't helping to resolve it. This justification and the one account that did pass suggests a political failure as the root cause.

### **We Have Met The Enemy**

How might these three failures inform KROC? What risks can we identify from these examples? The real risk seems to be assuming that good standards, disciplined workers, and process maturity alone are enough for successful process improvement.

Implicit in every standardization or process improvement effort are two views. The systems view holds that worker plus process is smarter than either alone. The worker view is that process changes the task.

Of course, any manager with a systems view wants standards and process because she wants a smarter system. It makes her life easier. But the workers see changed, and often harder, tasks as their former degrees of freedom disappear. They aren't going

to do processes that make them feel stupider, no matter what their managers might want.

This dynamic extends through all levels of the organizational hierarchy. If each individual doesn't see personal advantage in standards and processes imposed from above, then why should they adopt them? Why should they work harder and feel stupider?

Ultimately, imposing standards and processes doesn't produce a quality outcome. Worker integrity in the moment does.

Project workers make dozens of choices every day that contribute to the quality of the outcome. Good, documented standards and processes certainly inform these choices and provide the boundaries required for creative freedom, but it's the choices that count.

Workers will choose standards and processes that make their work easier, or at least those that make them feel smarter. The key question is: "What standards and processes will we choose to ensure quality?". That means that it's the workers at every level that count. I suspect Ray Kroc would agree. mgg



### **Mastering Project Work**

Please consider joining with us in continuing this and other conversations on True North's new Mastering Project Work Yahoo Discussion Group

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MasteringProjectWork/>

Here, we have been considering such questions as what processes make us smart?, how do I successfully subvert the system so the system can work?, and other eternal dilemmas of project work. das



## Perspectives and Frames

by David A. Schmaltz

Years ago, while visiting the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, I found myself entranced by the icon collection. These paintings follow rules prescribed by religious doctrine rather than visual perspective. For instance, the most holy figure appears as the center, with the hierarchy of subsidiary figures arrayed without regard to photographic correctness, creating a puzzling portrait of the artist's culture.

Several points of discontinuity become apparent as your eyes try to translate these images using photographic rather than cultural translation rules. While individual figures approach our culture's notion of realism, the background surrounding them employ different vanishing points, confusing our eyes. The obvious masterpiece seems a jumble of disconnected images. The effect becomes a strange blend of the masterful and the primitive.

Spellbound in front of a striking example of the Adoration of the Magi, I noticed a woman standing next to me. Without breaking my gaze, I stage-whispered, "Isn't this remarkable?"

"Yes," she replied, "That's the most elaborate frame I've seen all day!"

She was looking at the frame! For that one shocking moment, we bridged the space between our experiences. I was disappointed that she hadn't seen what I saw, though I did not envy her perspective. Like mirrors of the very artwork we were standing before, we had become a portrait of our own culture standing before an ancient one.

### *Adoration of the Magi*



by Fra Angelico  
National Gallery of Art  
Washington, DC

### The Rules of Organization

Businesses organize in ways remarkably similar to ancient religious icons, following some

doctrine rather than simple photographic perspective. The most politically powerful figure gets elevated in the center, with subsidiary figures arrayed to represent their power relationship to this centerpiece, without regard to photographic perspective or more practical realities. Our traditions tell us how to create and maintain relationships which reinforce cultural necessity without fully satisfying our mind, our eye, or our shared purpose. We look upon these relationships with either the satisfaction that comes from thorough acculturation or with the nagging disquiet of someone not fully entranced by the rules.

Those complaining of any icon's shortcomings disclose their cultural cluelessness.

Those thoroughly immersed in the society find deep satisfaction there. Dissatisfaction raises only irrelevant points. The quality of the result depends upon perspective, which is a resonance of the culture it swims in. I can complain that Fra Angelico was a primitive painter, yet he is widely considered to be a founding father of modern art.

Several years ago, a friend visited Tuscany. On a hot summer afternoon, she visited Veccio, Fra Angelico's birthplace. Seeing a sign near the road, she stopped and began walking the neighborhood, looking for the revered house. Unable to find it, she stopped a woman and asked her, "Is this Fra Angelico's home?" "Yes," she re-



plied, appearing surprised at the question. My friend continued in serviceable Italian to question the woman, who grew increasingly intrigued. "How do you know of my father?" she finally asked. "Your father?", my friend replied. "Yes, my father," the local said. "He owned a button factory which operated in this house for many, many years." Her father "Fra" Angelico was not the father of modern art. The local had never heard of the famous painter.

The state of any art might satisfy an artist or it might satisfy some of his patrons. Sometimes both. Every organization, like every piece of art, will be seen from many different perspectives and represent many different things to those who create and those who view it.

The present state of the project art seems focused upon enforcing a single set of rules for construction, execution, and control, though each project includes by necessity, areas of both severe and subtle disconnection from these rules. These discontinuities upset the ideologue. The master seeks to understand the culture before they critique the art, understanding that all art represents the culture creating it. From within the culture, the goodness of the art can be critiqued. From outside the culture, critique becomes meaningless.

When I rail about the foolishness of Earned Value calculations, I dis-close my own culture without, perhaps, understanding the deep needs of another. Those adopting XP or Agile practices might not understand that these, too, are state of the art resonances of their founding cultures, and find themselves engaging in complicated and often unsuccessful attempts to change the culture to fit the art. This effort seems similar to my trying to convince my fellow gallery visitor to share my experience

rather than the one she intended for herself.

### **Absolutely Essential, Apparently Non-Value-Added**

Most projects spend too much and achieve too little, but these measures ignore the absolutely essential, apparently non-value added perspectives necessary to the state of any art as practiced. My culture treasures efficiency, even though we can rarely finely calculate it. This obsession seems absurd only to those who have not fully immersed themselves in this culture.

***"We can change how we relate to the offending portrait or move on to another gallery better suiting our tastes, but we cannot, will not, dare not try to change the painting hanging before us."***

Bateson said that if you feel crazy, you have two choices. You can either work to become better acculturated or move to a culture where your behavior is considered sane. Our occasional bouts with insanity inform us about the effectiveness of our adaptation to reality as practiced here. We can change how we relate to the offending portrait or move on to another gallery better suiting our tastes, but we cannot, will not, dare not try to change the painting hanging before us. This seems the true state of every art.

Whether or not we adore the Adoration of the Magi or the frame surrounding it depends upon our own perspective. We can engineer a primitive coherence among us by enforcing a proper perspective upon our shared experience, though this strategy seems destined to maintain our own sanity at the cost of driving others crazy. A more mature perspective might ap-

preciate the differing perspectives, acknowledging that each informs every other one without defining the whole experience. Rather than rail about the state of the art or the skill of the artist, we might consider the state of the one viewing the art, which is the only state any of us have much control over.

A critic once approached Picasso, complaining that his paintings were too abstract and lacked real perspective. When Picasso asked what he meant by real perspective, the critic produced a photograph of his wife. Picasso commented that the critic's wife was awfully small and flat. das



### **Compass Becomes an eBook PDF Publication**

With this issue, *Compass* becomes an electronic-only publication. *Compass* was originally a paper-only newsletter. Improving technology offered the opportunity to produce both paper and electronic versions. Now economics and technology tell us that it's time to leave the paper trail behind.

If you've been receiving the paper publication and you'd like to continue receiving *Compass*, please send your email address to **Compass-mail@yahoo.com**, and we'll add you to the distribution list. We will send an email announcing each new edition, and you can download it from our website as a bright, shiny new.pdf. If you've been receiving the paper version and you'd like to stop receiving *Compass*, you don't need to do anything. If we do not have your email address, the paper notice you received announcing this issue will be the last one you receive from us.

We intend to retain the same high editorial standards and the same

exceptional layout and graphics. We can do a bit more in an eBook document, such as provide hot links to related subjects. We hope you will choose to continue receiving *Compass* in this new format.



## Dead Horses Living Work

by David A. Schmaltz

Management is a practice focused upon building boxes which we exhort each other to think and act outside of. This paradox is the logical extension of any set of beliefs. We target efficiency and bemoan our lack of humanity. We reward individual contribution and mourn the resulting absence of community. We sacrifice ourselves and wonder where our purpose goes.

We find our carefully constructed boxes lacking and search for better boxes. It almost never occurs to us that our relationship to these boxes, and not any box itself, creates our continuing dissatisfaction.

Humans need boxes. Without them, chaos overwhelms us. Within them, though, our constructions always fail us. The resulting logical discontinuities stymie us until we imagine a better box and the promise of a new and improved construction renews our sense of purpose. This construction and disintegration cycle never ends.

I won't criticize these boxes. Since they are essential, their shortcomings cannot be the point. Forgetting that each box is a choice, temporary and fleeting, contributes more to our difficulties than any box's unavoidable shortcomings.

Several years ago, I wrote a piece in this newsletter called "Project Management Is Dead." Since then,

I've been passionately flogging that horse as if my efforts would or could revive him. I've advertised myself as a "Project Management Consultant," understanding somewhere deep inside myself that this was akin to calling myself a dead horse beater. My contributions to the body of understanding surrounding the profession have been well-intended, but I must admit, though late by anyone's standards, that they sum to irrelevance for me.

***"I've advertised myself as a 'Project Management Consultant,' understanding somewhere deep inside myself that this was akin to calling myself a dead horse beater."***

Project Management is not dead for everyone, but continuing this tangled association has become increasingly difficult for me. We have achieved the state of the art as box builders, able to control projects in ever more sophisticated, though still troublingly dissatisfying ways. Not everyone has tired of the pursuit, but I have.

Such realizations inevitably invoke an identity crisis for anyone as involved in their work as I am. I was not simply employed as a project management consultant, but I became one. It was, while it lived, as honest an expression of myself as my breathing or my thoughts. If I was not to do this, I pondered deeply, what was I to do? Who was I to be?

I could have simply looked at what I had been doing for the answer, but such convenient sources never seem obvious from within the swirl of a full-blown identity crisis. I could have considered the stucknesses I had so deftly helped my clients untangle for themselves as examples of what I might do for myself in this situation. But who could categorize what seemed so

effortless and so natural into anything like a label for their own life's work?

## A Different Kind of Consulting Practice

At about the same time as I discovered that project management was dead, I crafted a unique model for a consulting practice, one I labeled "Brief Consulting." This perspective seemed to address many of the common difficulties encountered in classical consulting engagements. You know the pattern: they take too long, they cost too much, they achieve too little.

Considering insights from several fields, I saw some common patterns emerging. Lasting change often occurs with little disruption. People often consider their own dilemmas and choose appropriate alternate courses of action for themselves. The idea that an expert is needed to guide the way is often proven wrong in practice, as the client comes to discover their own power and authority in spite of, rather than because of, their advisor's best efforts. Hiring a consultant often amounts to a denial of personal capability, and an expensive and frustrating one at that. Imagine a consulting practice focusing upon helping the client overcome the denial of their own capability and you've imagined Brief Consulting.

***"Hiring a consultant often amounts to a denial of personal capability"***

Much of my best work has been focused upon releasing death grips other consultants have innocently imposed upon their clients, or they have imposed upon themselves. One international accounting firm, hired to manage a large ERP implementation, could not acknowledge, much less address, the simple factors reinforcing their client's inca-



capacity. Both struggled with "changing the company culture" because they could not acknowledge the status quo. The accounting firm made no progress, collecting a few hundred thousand dollars each month, while steadfastly "managing" the effort according to the best state of the art practices, ignoring one simple element that could have enabled the operation to find their own way. I've grown to call this approach "needier than the client," but the pyramid compensation schemes employed by such firms nearly guarantee neediness and encourage engaging in ultimately meaningless work.

My brief consulting engagement there lasted a few days and popped some of the illusions holding that organization hostage. The big accounting firm left, refunding some of their fees in exchange for eternal silence about the misunderstanding. Their project manager, while properly certified though he could not manage his way out of a paper bag, especially if it held a pint of Kentucky bond, was, I am certain, assigned to another helpless case to generate his contribution to the collective revenue stream.

The client went on to find their own way. That way was not easy, but it transformed them from struggling to fail to struggling to succeed. And they succeeded on several levels. They did not achieve their goal in any way like they assumed they would at the start. They achieved the ability to change their mind when they recognized their approach was not working, and choose something different. They lost some of their former ability to stay frozen in role as if their failures were working for them. They became a bit more real in the process.

## Under The Guise

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I did this work under the guise of a project management consultant, though I spent little time looking at plans or proposing improvements to grand strategies, and certainly never suggested improvements to any process. I told myself at the time that I needed this guise in order for my clients to properly classify my potential contribution. If they had a project management problem, they might consider hiring me, though I had never seen and still have not found a project management problem anywhere near the root of any project's difficulties. I would come in under the cover of my own darkness to shine some useful light. My duplicity seemed necessary.

No more. For those of you who have recently subscribed to this newsletter, I apologize for the bait and switch. Those who have maintained their association might have seen through the veil long before I could admit to it. I hope that those employed in project work will continue to find useful insights here, in future issues, though the focus will most certainly shift to include topics germane to project work, but not specifically focused there.

I feel like an artist who is shifting his medium. Having successfully experienced the state of my art, I move to consider another form. I have a successful book about project work, though those looking for process and method advice there have sometimes reported omissions.

They found instead, a consideration of frames of reference, of how they inform and blind us, of how we might choose to shift them when they prove encumbering. Within those lines and behind the misdirecting label, I consider what makes cooperative work succeed

for me. A sweet-smelling rose disguised under a misleading name. The elements of a successful Brief Consulting practice gush from around every one of its gaskets.

***"I have grown tired of reforming project management. I fully acknowledge project practice as a resonance of whatever culture engages in project work."***

With all due respect to my colleagues, I have grown tired of reforming project management. I fully acknowledge project practice as a resonance of whatever culture engages in project work. What might be a simple choice for someone outside that supporting culture, is an imperative from within it.

Cultures change glacially, but they can and do learn quickly. Brief Consulting is about learning from within a culture, not about changing the culture. The history of attempts to change culture is long and sorry. The human capability to learn within even the most encumbering constraints seems a better focus for my efforts and one more likely to succeed. Or so my experience has taught me.

## Out Of The Closet

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So, I'm out of the closet now. You will not hear me any longer railing about anyone's body of knowledge, no matter how questionable, but about the bodies of personal understanding that inform every practicing professional. I will continue to share my insights, often unsettling even to me, in the sincere hope that my struggles will inform yours. I will warmly anticipate your stories, too, as we continue to make meaning of the boxes we so carefully build and expectantly inhabit. das



## About *Compass*

*Compass* is published periodically by **True North pgs, Inc.**, and is distributed free of charge to a world-wide community.



*Compass* is a navigation tool for continuing your practice of improving your experience.

*Compass* shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective leadership to yourself and to your community. We enable each other to improve the quality of our experiences by sharing our stories and our insights.

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David A. Schmalz, Founder

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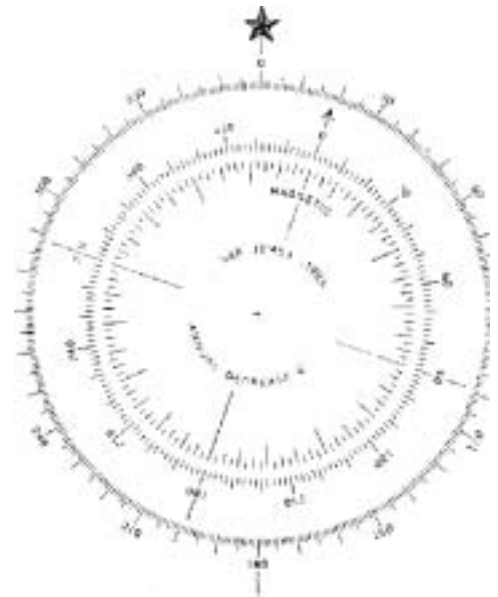
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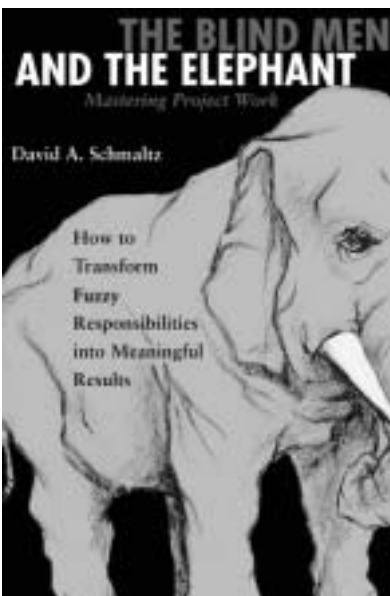


## The Blind Men and the Elephant

*"There were six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined..."*

So begins John Godfrey Saxe's fable of the blind men who failed to see an elephant together. Though each was able to perceive their piece of the beast, none were able to integrate their individual perspective into a coherent whole.

The result? You've seen it on each of your projects. During that time, which sometimes extends until after the project concludes, factions argue about the true



nature of the beast which none of the combatants will ever see.

In my book, ***The Blind Men and the Elephant, Mastering Project Work***, (Berrett-Koehler, 2003), I consider this universal feature of our project work and offer some simple tactics for creating the coherent experiences we each aspire to achieve.

Google the title or my name to see reviews of the book. It'll soon be available in Chinese, Russian, Dutch, Spanish, and Korean. Also, Hollywood's calling! The publisher's optioned the film rights! Stay tuned for details!

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