

Game Master or Game Player?

- Effective and meaningful project meetings in practice

Erfarings- og forskningsbaseret paper

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Abstract

For practitioners

What can the project manager say and do to avoid a potential chaotic project meeting and create an effective and meaningful project meeting? This is a key question for the project manager striving to develop effective project processes. I unfold five practical examples of how I stay above the meeting and redirect potential chaotic situations into meaningful and effective meetings. I present a five phase model that assists me in staying above the meeting. My central point is that I, the meeting facilitator must be present in the meeting (game player) but also above it (game master) setting the rules for the meeting.

For theorists

For those with a theoretical interest the paper illustrates how systemic and communications theory may be put into practice in order for the project manager to facilitate effective and meaningful project meetings.

Categorising communication and project meetings as “languages games”, the role and tools of the “game master” is unfolded with practical examples. The game master sets the rules for the language games at project meeting, (e.g. the rules for communication during the meeting) and is capable of redirecting the communication into more productive patterns of interaction. The “game player” knows how to play the language game but does not have the communicative competencies to redirect the game or enhance its quality. Perceiving language as co-ordination of coordination of action, the proposition of the paper is that game master competencies allows for better coordination of actions in the project process.

Keywords

Meeting facilitation, coaching,

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1. Introduction

Project management consists of a lot of meetings in order to coordinate action. I presume that you also are familiar with meetings that runs of track or where the point of it all seems lost from the beginning or simply vanishes during the meeting.. Or where it is unclear what was actually decided. Facilitating meaningful meetings is a complicated task.

In the following I will illustrate how I have put systemic and communications theory into practice when facilitating particular project meetings. Focus is on my specific practice and I only briefly present the theoretical sources of my practise at the end of the paper. You will be presented for my reflections on why I do what I do when facilitating the project meeting. This, I hope, will allow you to recognize situations from you work as project manager and inspire you to think about how your practise may be improved.

Below I present five examples of bifurcation points in project meetings I have facilitated. Bifurcation points are situations where the meeting could turn chaotic or become an opportunity for the project manager to create a meaningful meeting.

2. Bifurcation points: examples of situations where the meeting is about to become chaotic

2.1 Example 1: “Agenda problems”

The meeting starts. I, The project manager re-announce the theme/agenda for the meeting. One participants says “I think we should also debate issue x” another participant adds “before we debate issue x we should also debate y (neither x or y is on the agenda)

2.1.1 My reflections

The above is a bifurcation point. This is where the meeting could go off track. However applying game master competencies to facilitation of the meeting I may use the utterances to create a meaningful meeting.

Firstly, I paused the meeting. I wrote the planned points for the agenda on a large screen for everyone to see. I added the two points made by the participants. Then I made it clear that only one person speaks at the time so that others can listen. Then I asked the participants one by one: *How does your proposed issue x and y relate to the theme for the meeting? How is your proposed issue important for the progress of the project at this particular time?* This opens up for reflecting on whether I/the participants find it meaningful to put x and y on the this particular agenda and most importantly: why is x/y relevant/irrelevant in the context of the theme for the meeting. The final decision is of course taken by the project manager. In this particular case we found out it made good sense to integrate one of the points in the agenda while the other issue was better handled at a later meeting.

2.2 Example 2 “I am right –they are wrong”

The meeting is intended as an exchange of experiences between four locations involved in a pilot on managerial practise of coaching employees in a call centre in order to improve customer service. Present are 4 managers and 16 employees. After a while it becomes

evident that each location follows the pilots coach model and finds the coaching highly beneficial to job- and customer satisfaction. However there are variations of coaching practices at the four locations and each manager/location orally expresses that his/her own practice is the best and subtly suggests that the other managers practices are damaging to the project goals.

2.2.1 My reflections

Each manager's positioning of himself as being right and positioning of the others as being wrong may in itself be damaging to learning and the co-construction of the pilots coaching model. This represents a bifurcation point. My intervention builds on the assumption that each manager's practice makes perfect sense from his/hers perspective. I therefore ask the managers and the employees to take 10 minutes to compose questions to the other managers/locations. However, they start composing questions like

"How can it be possible to gain trust of the employees when your coach session takes places in your office and not in the open work space?"

I sensed that the line of questions could re-inforce the positioning of the others as being wrong. And not unfold the "wisdom" of practising coaching this particular way. To frame the crafting of questioning more explicitly I said:

"It seems like each one of you have found a valuable modus operandi for coaching that works for you at your location. Try asking the other managers what reflections they had when choosing their particular modus operandi. Try ask the other managers and employees what good experiences they have doing it this way."

This intervention dramatically changed the conversations into more fruitful patterns. E.g. It became evident that the manager that coached in his own office and not in the open office among other employees did so because he was unable to concentrate in the noise from the call centre. His intention was to give a excellent coaching, His practise was not- as suggest be the other managers – perceived as a lack of openness by the coached employees.

Another manager's practise was to listen to an employee's phone-conversations with customers for an hour taking notes, and coaching the day after. It turned out that that in order to give a good coaching this manager had to prepare the wording of his feed back and questions in order to practise an appreciative inquiry approach and give a precise feed back. During the meeting it became clear that one of the sources to the success of the pilot on all four locations was the adherence to the common coach model in combination with room for local variations in coaching practise as illustrated above.

The above exemplifies how the manager's actions and intentions behind were indeed closely connected to fulfilling the project goals. However it would not have been unfolded/visible had I not intervened and changed the patterns of communication into more fruitful ones.

2.3 Example 3: Improving coordination - "The others have to change"

Four middle managers comprise the project group which I lead. Each middle manager has 10 employees under them. The context for the meeting is how to improve coordination between a work function that is split between the four geographical locations which each has its own middle manager responsible for the local team performance.. Each team does a splendid job seen from their "looking post" in the organisation. However from the point of view of the project manager (me) – and increasingly the middle managers- – there is a growing conviction that there is a great synergy potential by making it possible for the

separate four units to coordinate more wisely in relation to each other. However, at the meeting I sense a underlying logic or problem definition among the managers: *"When the other managers do not act in a way that is well coordinated with my location it is because some of the other managers lack will or cognitive ability to act the way I want them to act."* Thus everyone see the potential but does not necessary have great belief in the future coordination to succeed. The mantra seems to be *"The others (not me) have to change their actions before we can succeed."* This positioning of themselves and the other managers risks creating a deadlock at the meeting.

My hypothesis is that the major obstacle for better coordination is not lack of will - there is a tremendous will – but 1) the managers assumptions that the conditions for practise on the local level is similar between locations. 2) the positioning of the others as not willing to change their action 3) the idea that" the others have to change their behaviour (not me).

I framed the first phase of the meeting as a decision free zone where we would explore ideas on what could be better coordinated and how we could do it. Shortly after the meeting had started one manager proposed a what and a how (a solution that would in his view improve coordination) However, it seemed unclear to the others why it was a good idea. I therefore posed the question (1): *"What is it that you experience/observe in your department that makes you say/do that?"*

The manager responded by talking in more detail about the conditions on his location and why the proposed solution would make perfect sense seen from his looking post in the organisation. The other managers became puzzled and energized experiencing that conditions on the different locations that they thought were similar were not. They started sharing differences and similarities in conditions. And with this knowledge they became able to have an meaningful dialogue on how to plan coordination of actions more fruitfully. The behaviour of the other locations were no longer perceived as "odd" or "strange". A little later the managers had come up with a plan to improve coordination when a location had location meeting and had to suspend the work schedule for an hour or so. To clarify why it would be a good idea I asked the managers (2) : *"If we implement that solution, what will then be possible for you/the customers/employees etc. that is not possible now?"* The managers debated this and came up with some answers. I then posed the question (3): *"How does that link to the project goals?"* Again the managers debated this and came up with some answers.

2.3.1 My reflections

Question 1: My question helped unfold the logic of the statement/action, so the manager's implicit definition of challenges/problems and his implicit assumptions about causal links that re-creates the challenges, is made explicit for others to couple on to his argumentation. The decision free zone is needed in order to engage in exploring the subject. One cannot listen with the mouth full of words. If we are constantly focusing on a making a decision or occupied with avoiding that a particular decision is about to be made, then is it not possible to listen for the logic in what the others a saying. The meeting becomes a series of "collective monologs". Instead I want to create conversations were the participants would connect constructively to what had already been said.

Question 2: *"what will then be possible for you/costumers/employees?"* invites them to link their proposal to assumed affects on important stakeholders. Once again making the logic of the proposal explicit to the other members of the project group.

I ask about the vision for the future that often lies hidden implicit in definition of the problem. Or what situation there is uttered a wish to depart from. Defining what we want to achieve rather what the problem is, is often more helpful for co-creating constructive and meaningful actions that improve the future in the organisational context. The intentions of my questioning in this phase is therefore to create a broader vision of the desired future that is hoped for. In my experience it is essential for a meaningful "exploration phase" to gain an idea of what the others for the moment perceive as the preferred future state of affairs..

Question 3: "*How does that link to the project goals?*" is linking the proposals to the highest context for the project meeting: Reaching the project goals.

2.4 Example 4: Deciding and planning: "what did we decide?"

Projecting onto a large screen for everyone to see I write a decision and planning summary during the meeting. I invite the participants to word the summary by asking "*so what have you decided?*" I pose the question in order for them to take charge in formulating what actually was the decision. Often we find that there is not a specific enough decision or mutual understanding of what was decided. It is only after I ask the question that the process of deciding get close to be completed.

The reaction to my question and projecting of the summary often is: "*What! Are we deciding now? I thought we were still debating*". Or "*now that I see it on writing I think we need to be more precise about what we mean by it*". Or "*for that decision to be meaningful we must also decide on...*"

2.4.1. My reflections

Projecting the real time writing of the summary onto a large screen for everyone to see makes explicit the shift in phases from exploring the subject to deciding on what to do. Projecting the summary on a large screen while writing also enhances the mutual understanding of what has been decided/what is about to be decided. Thirdly, inviting the managers to co-construct the wording of the summary, positions the managers as responsible for making clear decisions that are understandable and can be clearly linked to the project goals. The anticipated consequences of the decisions therefore become clearer. This mechanism of understandable decisions is reinforced in the planning phase where I become very specific asking the participant whom has to do what when" in order for the decisions to be executed.

2.5 Example 5: Feed forward: "What are these decisions and plans supposed to be good for?"

People might leave the meeting without a clear idea of how these decisions and plans are supposed to contribute to the project goals. Hence the participants motivation and the positive effect of the meeting is endangered. At the end of the meeting I therefore often ask questions like:

Having made these decisions and plans what will become possible for whom? How does that contribute to the project goals? What could be specific signs that we are headed in the right direction?

2.5.1 My reflections

The purpose of this phase /questions is to make explicit what will become possible when the decisions have been executed. We have already discussed it during the exploration and decision phase but is often of great benefit to memory, motivation and coordination of action to sum up why we made these decision: what will now become possible. Is is not always as easy as one should think.

3. Levels of the meeting: *In* and *above*

My practise rests on my assumption that in order to create effective and meaningful meeting the facilitator has to be present *in* the meeting (game player) but also *above* it (game master).

Above the meeting the facilitator is concerned with setting and evoking the communicative rules for the meeting, explicating the phases of the meeting and asking questions that may change the language games that the participant engage in into to more fruitful ones. This in turn allows the participants/game players to focus on the subject as the structure of the meeting and the communicative rules is mastered by the facilitator (game master).

Above the meeting (meta-level): Game Master²

Focus on the structure: defining and evoking the rules of the game (the meeting)

In the meeting: Game player³

Focus on content: living the rules of the game (the meeting)

Figure 1. Levels of the meeting

For game mastery of project meetings I have developed a general phase model that assists me in being “*above*” the meeting, e.g analysing, structuring and setting the rules for what we are doing “*in*” the meeting. The model seems to work for most of my meetings. However, at some meetings I only used the first two phases.

The model consists of “general rules” for communication throughout the meeting. Rules which I have found useful. You may make up your own.

Next in the model I have the concept of “time out”. Sometimes I become confused on what we are doing in the meeting or sense that we are meshing phases or debating an issue which linkage to the agreed theme is unclear. I then use the “time out” to have a

² Looking at/ listening to communication from a third person perspective (the observer/game master) Barnett Pearce defines communication as “..a game-like pattern of social interaction comprised of a sequence of acts, each of which evokes and responds to the acts of other persons. “Pearce (1999): *Using CMM*, p. 28.

³ Engaging in communications from a first person perspective (the participant/game player) Barnett Pearce defines communication as “ a process of coordinating actions within a working definition of a situation”,

Pearce (1999): *Looking Using CMM*, p. 28.

conversation about the conversation in the meeting with the participants: “e.g. “how is what we are doing/debating relevant in relation to the theme of the meeting?”

Thirdly in the model I have placed the five phases: “Contract”, basically refers to what the meeting is about, and what is supposed to be possible after we have had the meeting that was not possible before. “Exploring the subject” which is a wide category with the special feature that it is kept a decision free zone. ” There after follows “deciding” and “planning”. Finally, I invite to “feed forward” which is intended to make explicit what will become possible for whom because we made these decisions. Most importantly feed forward on how each decision will contribute to reaching the project goals. In the model I have listed examples of questions that I often hear myself ask during “time out” and in the five phases.

General rules

1) I separate participants in speaking and listening positions. 2) I Unfold the logic of participant's utterances/make the implicit explicit. 3) I make the shift in phases (contract, exploring, deciding etc.) explicit and transparent. 3) I make explicit what is open for discussion and what issues that are not open for discussion (e.g. goals set by top management, purpose of the project, time limit, budget ect.)

Time out: The game master invite to talk *about* the meeting: is what we are doing/talking about still relevant? Which phase are we in? Are we on the right track? How does that issue related to the theme.

Contract	Exploring the subject. – a decision free zone	Deciding	Planning	Feed forward
What is important to talk about? Why? If this turns out to be an effective and meaningful meeting, how will we know? What should be possible after the project meeting that is not possible now? How will these anticipated changes contribute to the goals of the project?	What is it that you experience/observe in your department that makes you say that? What is your definition of the challenge/problem/success? What do you want to get away from? What do you wish to achieve? If we succeed how will we know? What is your ideas of what you/we can do to achieve that? How does your proposed solution/action contribute to the goal of the project?	What should be done. How does your suggestions for decisions relate to the different points in the debate. How will decisions X contribute to the project goals? What have we decided?	Who does what when? In order for x to happen? who should have done what when?	Having made these decisions and plans what will become possible for whom? How does that contribute to the project goals? What could be specific signs that we are headed in the right direction?

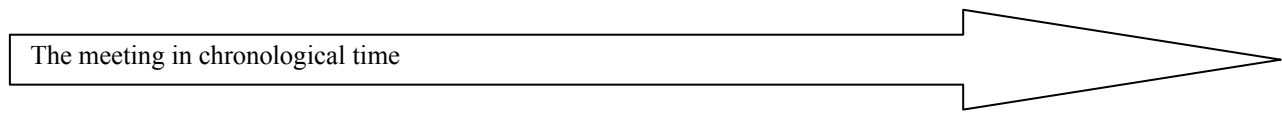


Figure 2. My model for “game mastering project meetings”

4. Theoretical framework

My theoretical framework is build around communications professor Barnett Pearce's metaphors game master and game player (Pearce, 1999). His metaphors are inspired by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's metaphor of social interaction as language games in which specific rule are evoked by the participants. E.g. rules about what can be talked about and how we talk together. Furthermore in language games we position ourselves and others and are invited to take positions our self during the conversation (Harrè, 1999). The "rules" or positions evoked during the conversation may be explicit or implicit as well as know or unknown, accepted or not accepted by the different participants in the language game. My questions are inspired by theory of circular questioning (Tomm, 1988)

Applying a systemic constructionist perspective on facilitating project meetings I recognize the mastery of language games as the single most important position (Harre, 1999) for facilitating coordination (conversation/language) of coordination of action (Pearce, 1999; Maturana 1987).

Pearce differentiates between game master competencies and game player competencies. The game player plays the game on different levels of competencies. The game master is a competent player but also a capable of changing the working definition and context of the conversation/situation/episode as well as patterns of communication into new and more attractive productive patterns⁴ (Pearce, 1999).

I use "game master" (Pearce, 1999) as a metaphor for a meta-position in the language game. From the game master position I am concerned with the in-the momement-facilitation of reflection, dialogue and decisions on the episodic level (Pearce, 1999). From the game player position people are engaged in reflection, dialogue and decision making. As a project manager I make agile shifts between the game master position as well as the game player positions (e.g. momentarily talking from an expert position) at sense making sessions with the project team.

Meaning and sense making are fundamental dimensions for a human being (Weick, 1996). Without meaning we look, think and act in other directions in an attempt to create new meaning. Constructing meaning together is by no means an easy endeavour as it is the receiver that determines the message (Maturana, 1987).

Maturana (Maturana, 1987), a neurobiologist, has proved that our creation of meaning happens in our own close nervous systems circuit. He calls this autopoiesis [self creation or self reference] and claims that this is true for all living systems. Maturana claim that our nervous system never allow us to completely understand the world outside our selves, e.g. the ideas, thoughts and feelings of another person. However, the autopoietic system is capable of changing its interpretations of phenomena over time through connecting to thoughts, ideas and actions that build further on its own constructed structures of meaning (Maturana, 1987) However, there is no way of knowing which bit of information that will be

⁴ Everything we do produces something. Attractive productive refers to it being an attractive development/pattern seen from eye of the beholder. Attractive productive is a term I made up.

the information that will make a difference for the autopoietic system and invite to change (Bateson, 2005) and there is no way of knowing what will be the result of the stimulus should the autopoietic system initiate changing its structure. Our nervous system is a source of cognitive stability as well as change, allowing us to reinvent our perceptions of - and actions in - the world.

The concept of autopoiesis means that we connect to what is meaningful for us. Decisions, strategies and change processes that we are not able to connect to become meaningless, but in an effort to create meaning anyway, each employee or manager acts according to what is meaningful to him or her; in a logic way and with good intentions – seen from the logic of the autopoietic system itself. This situation calls for an unnecessary messy project process. The challenge, from a leadership and organisational perspective, is to coordinate local logic and wisdom of different autopoietic systems in a forward-oriented way (co-creation of meaning) with a sharp focus on the project goals/ organisational task⁵. This is why I am concerned with creating effective and meaningful project meetings: It paves the road for effective and meaningful project processes.

⁵ Basically, it calls for the project manager being curious about why other people act as they do, and how it is possible to connect the individual perspective to the project/organisational perspective. The latter should always be the highest context for decisions and action

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