The Ethical Responsibilities of Project Work

“What’s the difference between a jackass and a human being? There are some things a jackass just won’t do!”

Mark Twain

Several years ago, I was invited into one of the large mortgage bundling ... errr, banking operations to visit with their project managers. I learned that several of their largest projects were working on developing a response to what they called The Perfect Storm. I asked, and they described the perfect storm for me:

One of these days, probably not tomorrow, these artificially low interest rates will rise, the bubbled-up real estate prices will fall, frantic new home construction will slow, home equity value will shrink, foreclosures will increase, and faith in these questionable mortgages we bundle and pass on will plummet.

I checked back last month to see if the current sub-prime mortgage crisis had come close to fulfilling their perfect storm scenario. The response: “The current situation is much, much worse.”

An Imperfect Storm

The first project I ever participated in started as a straightforward package implementation and was managed into a catastrophe. I remember wandering into my division VP’s office just after that final go-no go steering committee meeting to learn what decision they’d taken. The new system had never been successfully tested, so the clerks had received training using only paper mock-ups of the online environment. I was at that time responsible for an administrative function that relied completely upon the online system, so I had a real stake in the decision. So did my VP.

“We decided to go,” he explained. “If the system’s in production, we’ll focus more energy on making it work. If we keep it in test, we’ll always have contention for resources.”

I stood there, gape-mouthed, and replied, “This will live on as the single most irresponsible decision of your career;” a little more than a little surprised at my sudden mouthiness.

A year later, we went live with the final daily-operational subsystem. Five years later, we were still cleaning up the mess. Between decision and fulfillment lay the most memorably messy years I’ve ever experienced. The footnote in the annual report vaguely mentioned some difficulties with a
computer system, but didn’t hint at the super-human effort that finally salvaged a shaky status quo.

Yes, I stayed on to clean up that completely avoidable mess. In fact, almost no one either on the implementation project team or in the severely-impacted administrative areas left the company during that imperfect storm. Morale was consistently very high throughout, even though almost everyone spent most of their time cleaning up the most disgusting disorder.

I wonder now, with a comfortable thirty-year cushion since then, what might have happened had those receiving that order to move that pseudo-system into production simply refused. Would they have been fired or listened to? Could they have influenced that steering committee to actually steer rather than bull their way into the future?

In every career, anyone working on projects will receive several memorably irrational orders. Those serving on boards of directors and steering committees are usually far-removed from the ground-level realities of day-to-day operations, focused—as they should be—on the strategic horizon. What connects vision with capability, decisiveness with actually getting stuff done? Projects do. It’s easy to speak about aligning the organization, but infinitely more difficult to balance the political realities of organizational life, especially from a position of little political power, like from within a project.

I’ve written before about the absurd process by which contracts were awarded in the now infamous Iraqi Reconstruction effort. And wondered what might have happened had no one chosen to bid. But many chose to bid, and unless each was completely clueless about what constitutes achievable objectives—an absurd assumption—, none expected to succeed under the agreed-upon terms. Some would characterize these bidders immoral, but when has morality been primal where money’s involved? As Mark Twain claimed, there are some things jackasses just won’t do.

A recent Office of Management and Budget audit calculated a seven cents return for every dollar invested in Homeland Security projects. Not seven percent return, but seven cents of value returned. If you think those project teams at Leyman Brothers and Bear Stearns didn’t understand that their systems developed to manage derivatives were a threat to the world’s financial system, think again. Senior management knew, too, but cloaked their concerns with best-case scenarios, justifying their judgment by claiming that if they didn’t help blow up the bubble, they’d just get bought up by someone who would. And so they continued to blow.
Some of the more judicious ones spawned Perfect Storm projects, but these were rather like buying more health insurance in lieu of stopping smoking. When the market’s hot, everyone seems to jump into the frying pan. When it chills, every lemming is forced to leap into the resulting fire.

When the project manager of Microsoft’s MS Project development effort discovered that the algorithm used to calculate critical path couldn’t correctly calculate it, he went to his management to report the error. “Yes, we know,” they told him. He agreed to stay until delivery, but left Microsoft immediately thereafter.

The scientist working to identify the source of the anthrax used to terrorize Congress in 2001 was pleased when her team conclusively proved it came from a domestic source. Delivering these results to the Homeland Security sponsor, the chief investigator was informed that his team had produced the wrong answer. Funding for the continuing investigation was transferred from this most capable national laboratory to a third rate university, which still hasn’t tracked down the “real” source. This scientist left the lab and went back to school to earn a degree in a health care field, abandoning a decades-long career as a scientist.

This manager and this scientist were making ethical choices for themselves. The ethics associated with any profession seem to inevitably entangle themselves within discussions of morality, right and wrong. Is it right for a project manager to agree to manage a project that in his best professional judgment cannot actually be completed, as those bidding on the Iraqi Reconstruction effort certainly did? Is it right for Microsoft to market a scheduling tool that cannot correctly calculate a critical path?

For rabbit or, as Mark Twain called them jackass rabbit, holes, morality is unsurpassed. We could argue morals endlessly and with immense personal satisfaction without accomplishing anything. So, in bringing up the potentially iffy topic of ethics, I will deftly sidestep the whole issue of morals and morality, right and wrong. I will claim, instead, that I can state what’s right for me without even denting what’s right or wrong for you.

Morality, slipping into biblical vernacular, proclaims “Thou Shalt.” Ethics claims rights only over the smaller but still significant territory circumscribed by “I Will.” Morality can be imposed while ethics always remains a matter of personal choice. I think of ethics as something I choose to do, understanding the cost of not doing them. For instance, I choose to trust—which, as I will explain further in a future installment, is one of my ethical responsibilities of project work—because I’ve learned the terrible cost of not trusting. To extend trust, then, for me, is an ethical
responsibility. I’m perfectly free to withhold my trust, but not without accepting personal responsibility for any resulting tangle.

What might constitute the ethical responsibilities of project work? I can speak to my own ethical responsibilities without prescribing them for anyone else. If I were to ask about your ethical responsibilities, how would you reply? If you found your tongue tied there, you’re discovering my point. Mostly, we are so deeply engaged in what we’ve been directed to do, often within some imperfect storm, that we’ve lost touch with those fundamental elements over which we eternally maintain choice. For ourselves and, by example, for others, too.

We might all be more comfortable without defining our ethical responsibilities, so why do I bring up this unsettling topic? In my thirty years of project work, most of the most contorted projects I’ve been associated with arose from someone not choosing what they were perfectly capable of choosing. If projects are the buffer between strategy and capability, they hold power unbestowed by any board, the power of choice. There are, like jackasses, some things ethical project managers just will not do. Employing this power is a matter of choice.

I write this brief series to inquire into the thorny topic of ethics. I will avoid prescribing for you and insist upon describing how it is for me and for the few others I’ve known. Whether you choose to adopt any of my ethical responsibilities will be your choice. No right, no wrong, simply useful ... or not.

I will conclude this installment by listing my seven ethical responsibilities, knowing full well that the list without explanation, might well flip your bozo bit or describe nothing. So be it. With your patient acquiescence, then, here they are:

I have the ethical responsibility to:

1- Acknowledge My Blindness and Yours
2- Pursue with Personal Purpose
3- Extend Trust
4- Make The Most Generous Interpretations
5- Work The System
6- Sit With The Mess
7- Make Informed Choices
The Ethical Responsibilities of Project Work - Part Two

“When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” Yogi Berra

More projects die from indigestion than ever starve to death. Indigestion is often a matter of choice. Do I choose the Swedish meatballs, delighting myself now and suffering later, or do I stick to the pasta primavera? Do I fake confidence to gain acceptance, deferring disappoint until later, or do I start spooning out bitter flavors before breakfast? My choice, and one too often taken lightly, even unconsciously.

No one knows which direction you should head when you reach the forks in your road. But Yogi's advice is still sage! At least be awake enough to take the forks you encounter; to take the decisions and make your choices, otherwise you forfeit all influence. The most powerful points of leverage every project has are the choices individuals make without even thinking about asking for permission to make them. Which is okay, because no one can decide these for anyone else, anyway.

And how well-informed are these choices? Poorly-informed choice carries the most powerfully insidious influence upon every project. It's capable of undermining everything. Because of this, I have created this series to better inform your choices. Success balances upon the choices we make when we might not think we're making any choice at all.

This brief series is only a start. It outlines the seven ethical responsibilities of project work. The first installment made the distinction between morals (You Shall!) and ethics (I Will!), defining ethics as personal choices made when acknowledging the cost of choosing otherwise. This installment considers the project worker's first three ethical responsibilities: Acknowledging Blindness, Pursuing With Personal Purpose, and Extending Trust.
I - Acknowledging Blindness

The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind
by Pieter Bruegel, 1568: Galleria Nazionale at Naples

“It is hard for us, without being flippan, to even see a scenario within any kind of realm of reason that would see us losing one dollar in any of those transactions.”

Socrates claimed to be the wisest man because he knew that he didn’t know, whereas others thought they knew, but didn’t. This ancient wisdom has gained new currency as the global financial system, so recently advertised as utterly reinvented, again demonstrates that it remains no different than it ever was. The laws of physics predict that what goes up, comes down harder. The laws of the universe seem to insist, as Ancient Greek myths insisted, that anyone believing he can see the future, offends the Gods. And offended Gods get even.

The small gods governing individual projects guard the past, present, and the future no less jealously than their global counterparts govern the future, though it’s easy to forget this wisdom when surrounded by the clever distractions of modern life. Projects succeed no more often now than they did a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand years ago, in spite of supposedly transformative technological advances. Today’s projects seem able to succeed and fail on scales unknown to the ancients, but our narrow understanding of the breadth of history might well delude us on this count. Remember the Tower of Babel?
Behind every catastrophic project failure lies a single root cause, a foresight convincing someone they can see something no one could ever see. Of course, successful projects carry the same curse. Both plan by poking sticks into utter darkness. Both survey the territory ahead by imagining rather than direct measurement. Both float upon a mythical past and a misleading present. Further, both are encouraged rather than made skeptical by the pseudo-certainty their vision instills. Consequently, both might well move forward feeling well-provisioned for the excursion they at best imagine themselves to be undertaking.

Invariably, somewhere between start and imagined finish, the unforeseen appears. Not quite the sublime beauty anyone imagined her to be, she’s stark-naked and wrestling with snakes. Who will win? Eventually, the gods award the championship belt to reality.

The wise project manager, sponsor, and worker understand that whatever lens he might use for peering into his past, present, and future, he sees no more (or less) than his own projected notions there. Like Socrates, he knows that he doesn’t know. He proceeds ‘as if’, without deluding himself that he knows, perhaps while even remembering that no prior success ever required that he know what no one could ever know.

Of the seven ethical responsibilities of project work, acknowledging blindness challenges me most. My customers want to know that I know, even when I do not, and it’s an easy and sometimes necessary seduction to dress up my speculations so they seem to give them what they so deeply desire, but do not really need. It’s a remarkably small step beyond that into the delusion to which human-kind has always been frighteningly vulnerable. Then, when given a clear choice between sustaining the delusion and grounding the vision, I, like yesterday’s despots and today’s derivative traders, unconsciously choose to sustain the delusion for (just) a little while longer.

Businesses are required by law to attach a disclaimer, a Safe Harbor Statement, to every forward-looking financial statement, acknowledging that the statement is speculation, not fact. The product of acknowledged blindness, not perfect foresight. Not even this precaution prevents some investors from deluding themselves.

Acknowledging this present possibility, I, in my head, always perform a formal ‘stamping ceremony’ as the closing ritual for every planning and every status reporting. With exaggerated solemnity, I imagine inking my rubber stamp and imprinting a simple reminder on the bottom of every plan: “This is not how we’ll get there,” and on the bottom of every status report: “This is not how it really is.”

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I believe that I have an ethical responsibility to acknowledge my inescapable blindness because my projects are better-served when I choose to acknowledge my blindness. Every project replays the ancient parable of the blind leading the blind. As the blind men who went to see the elephant discovered, the conviction that they could see created nothing really worth seeing, anyway.

2- Pursuing with Personal Purpose

Kevin Cashman, in his book *Leadership From The Inside Out*, recounts the old story of the man who encounters three laborers in a field. Asking each what they are doing, the first grumbles, “Harvesting beans,” the second explains, “Putting in time,” while the third claims “Supporting a family.” The first is working, the second, earning a paycheck, while the third is pursuing a purpose.

I always have a choice in the quality of work I engage in. This choice has nothing to do with my actual assignment, and everything to do with my mindset about it. Mindset, being causative, determines the quality of my experience. I have learned that I have the ethical responsibility to find personal purpose within every assignment, especially when that
assignment involves contributing to something I could honestly care less about. I know, I know, the methodology claims that I should stifle my personal purpose for the collective good. But this little calculation never worked out for me. How does subtracting my purpose increase the project’s overall purposiveness?

In my youth, I held the lofty position of pot washer in a fancy restaurant. Actually, pot washer was the lowliest job in the place, beneath even dishwasher; but for me, it was a lofty position because I never saw the job as work—endless queues of gunky pans, screaming chefs, snooty wait staff—or as merely a paycheck. (The paycheck wasn’t that great.) I saw the job for what it enabled me to do. The odd hours allowed me to write late at night, which was my passion then. It also exposed me to stories and human drama that informed my writing. I was never really washing pots there, but passionately pursuing my purpose.

You might struggle to see how I could find satisfying purpose washing pots, and that’s my purpose in mentioning this experience. My counterpart on the other shift was a lousy pot washer. He grumbled through every day, seeing the scorched pots as personal punishment and the chefs as his special tormenters. While I found the same experience satisfying. Chefs are slobs, and it was easy for me to far exceed their modest expectations. I worked in passionate serenity, producing uniformly high-quality results while drafting that night’s creation in my head.

I believe that pursuing personal purpose falls under the put-on-your-own-oxygen-mask-first principle. How can I help anyone else breathe easier if I am suffocating? Whatever the collective purpose, it will only be enhanced if pursued by individuals who are satisfied with their own experience. I know, as you know, that the paycheck just doesn’t warm the heart on cold nights, and self-discipline might well get me through those nights but leave me simply exhausted, never inspired. So, I consider it my ethical responsibility to find some way to use my assignment to pursue my personal purpose with evident passion. My projects just work better whenever I do. Don’t yours, too?
3- Extending Trust

The Almighty Buck!

Trust is the glue holding everything together.

You can always depend upon people doing just what they always do. You can, for instance, reliably trust any snake to be a snake. Likewise, a saint will perform like a saint. You can make yourself more trouble than you’ll ever need by trusting a snake to behave like a saint. This isn’t trust at all, but wishful thinking.

Yet we see people holding out for some perfectly reliable snake to reform himself into sainthood to prove his trustworthiness. The search for this sort of validation wastes more resources than any other five common project activities combined, while we hold ourselves (and our projects) hostage, waiting for someone to live up to our aspirations for them.

Our own belief about the trustworthiness of others deeply impacts everything. The absence of trust, and not the absence of trustworthiness, is the root of much evil in project work. Does reliability determine trustworthiness? If I claimed that I would deliver by Friday, then broke my leg and didn’t, was I untrustworthy or just unlucky? If I promised on Tuesday and reneged on Thursday, did I prove my untrustworthiness, or did my honest renege prove my trustworthiness? Who knows? Who really cares?

A project manager working in a production facility in China explained how trust works there. There, if someone says yes once, it doesn’t mean anything. Two yeses means maybe. Three yeses, and no fewer, he explained, means what we in the West translate as a definite yes. He said you can always depend upon this third yes. Everyone understands this. It’s a part of the culture.

We need trust now, not proven trustworthiness later, so I accept that if I want trust, we’re all better off if I extend it. No, I’m not being naive. I can trust AND count the cards, and I can depend upon any known card sharp to deal from the bottom of every deck, and adapt to the way he is, rather than turn blue holding my breath waiting for him to perform in ways he never has. I can set my expectations according to the way things are,
rather than how I wish they could be. That wishing is always all about me, anyway, never really about anyone else. Holding us all hostage to my inability to trust who you are simply constricts our possibilities. I can always trust you to be you, as you can always trust me to be me.

Trust is the glue holding everything together. Look on the back of the almighty buck and what do you find? A proclamation of trust! Whether you trust in God or your fellow man matters little. Without trust, nobody’s going anywhere together.

So, I accept that I have an ethical responsibility to extend trust rather than withhold it pending the results of some hopelessly hopeful trustworthiness test. Sure, I get bitten sometimes, but rarely. I can be sorry then, when I’ve actually been nipped, or the sorriest sort of safe all the time. My choice. My ethical responsibility.
The Ethical Responsibilities of Project Work - Part Three

This brief series outlines the seven ethical responsibilities of project work. The first installment made the distinction between morals (You Shall!) and ethics (I Will!), defining ethics as personal choices made when acknowledging the cost of choosing otherwise. The second installment considered three ethical responsibilities: Acknowledging Blindness, Pursuing With Personal Purpose, and Extending Trust, concluding that when coming to a fork in the road, taking it mindfully makes a real difference. This installment introduces three more ethical responsibilities: Making the Most Generous Possible Interpretations, Working The System So The System Can Work, and Sitting Comfortably With The Mess.

4- Making The Most Generous Possible Interpretations

“Jerks don’t buy disk drives.” JR Clark

Rather than exhort anyone to describe this glass as half full or half empty, I’ll admit that I’m a sucker for simple, iconic line drawings. No question what this is a picture of. No controversy. No ambiguity. No doubt. This is a line drawing depicting a glass with some water in it. Whether this illustration portrays a glass as half full or half empty, it’s a dandy drawing.

I introduce this drawing and my appreciation of it to illustrate an important point about project work. Generous interpretations simplify controversy. One of my mentors suggested that I judge any document by first comparing it to a blank sheet of paper, and appreciate that significant difference before cranking up my hyper-critical buzzsaw.

That mentor also recounted how he’d become a top salesman in the fledgling disk drive industry. He found himself spending most of every day meeting with one jerk or another, and each seemed to care less about his product. He just wanted lower prices, faster delivery, and larger storage capacity. The competition was brutal and few of these jerks ever actually bought anything from him, claiming that someone else could undercut the best of his offers. Then one morning, as he was dreading the upcoming day, he wondered if these sales calls would be any different if he really cared about his customer. Shuddering, he considered how he might more advantageously interpret their cold shoulders. He decided to find some reason to really care about the jerk he was scheduled to visit that
morning, and challenged himself to find something, anything that he might revere about him, then emanate positive, loving vibes for the duration of the meeting. This time, that jerk bought drives.

One result didn’t prove anything, but it inspired my mentor to replay this little fiction each time he found himself scheduled to visit another jerk. Months later, he’d become the top salesman, and when asked how he’d accomplished this feat, he repeated, “Jerks don’t buy disk drives.” His experience taught him that when he characterized his jerky customers as jerks, they always knew and rarely bought. His successes showed him that merely making more generous interpretations made a real difference.

Every project is half-full or half-empty with complications, Gordian knots made even more convoluted by our less-than-generous characterizations of them. I can have the same thing over and over again or one damned thing after another, but I have some choice. I’ve learned to call these would-be damning experiences “the normals,” and on my best days revel in—rather than revile—they.

I also inoculate myself against their poisonous influence by engaging in High Quality Project Management Humor, where I very deliberately interpret everything and everyone in the least generous possible light. This is a palate cleanser for me, engaged in light-heartedly to remind me that I hold the power to interpret however I might choose. It reminds me that things just work better when I make generous interpretations, and even better when I make the most generous possible ones.

I can be awfully critical when quality counts, but even then, recovery is easier when I don’t have to fill in a divot of despairing reaction before playing through. So I have elevated making the most generous possible interpretation to the lofty level of ethical responsibility, and I am actively trolling for opportunities to exercise this curious power.
5- Working The System So The System Can Work

“Shall I jump off or slide off?”

When Joe decided that Agile methods might dramatically improve his team’s performance, he passed the idea by his boss, who agreed that they might well improve performance, but would violate the company-wide software development methodology, which was adopted to ensure consistently high-quality performance. Scratching his head, Joe visited with the PMO and left with some newly suspicious overseers. Frustrated by his inability to sell his better mousetrap to the citizens of his local Hamlin, he conspired with his team to just start practicing Agile methods. Though the agilists insist that one must always start the agile journey by aligning the organization ahead of the initiative, Joe concluded that the organization would just have to line up behind it, after it had proven itself.

Joe never uses the ‘a’ word. His team doesn’t ever scrum, they just hold a brief, non-controversial meeting every morning. They don’t blow trumpets or raise battle flags, but quietly, effectively work as insurgents within the oblivious bureaucracy. Joe is careful to maintain the window-dressing necessary to make it appear as if his team is fully compliant with the methodology. By yearend, his team was by far the most productive in the company and now its practices are being championed for inclusion into the standard methodology by the PMO, even though the company has a policy against employing agile methods. Joe still never uses the ‘a’ word.

Joe was demonstrating the fifth ethical responsibility, working the system so the system can work. There has never been a system, method, or governance that worked as intended in practice. The methodology adopted to ensure high performance sometimes encumbers it. Any hard and fast rule bogs down when hub-deep in muck.

The choice then stands between compliant complaining or finding your own bootstraps. There is no leverage in obeying a rule that just doesn’t
work. No success possible under certain failure. And I don’t suggest merely tinkering or chronically creating back channels, but to understand that it will sometimes be your ethical responsibility to work the system so the system can actually work. This is a benevolent act, one intended to improve results, not to merely deviate from the accepted process.

This choice carries risks, though. You could be caught out, indictable if not convictable, and the jury that judges your deviations might judge you harshly, no matter how benevolent your intentions. When caught out, I recall the exchange between some vigilantes and a horse thief in nineteenth-century Montana Territory, described by R. G. H. Sui in The Craft of Power.

“When the vigilante caught up with him, he gave up without any argument. He then nonchalantly escorted his captors to the corral and identified the stolen horses. When informed of his doom, he appeared perfectly satisfied. On being taken into the barn, where a rope was thrown over a beam, he was asked to walk up a ladder, to save trouble about procuring a drop. He at once complied, addressing his captors in the following unique phraseology, ‘Gentlemen, I am not used to this business, never having been hung before. Shall I jump off or slide off?’ Being told to jump off, he said, ‘Alright, goodbye,’ and jumped off into the air with as much sang froid as if bathing. George’s parting question was for a long time a byword among the vigilantes.’

Done right, working the system so the system can work will sometimes feel like a choice between sliding off or jumping off. Most of your benevolence will fall unnoticed by anyone but you. We design them without intending to make them unworkable. Our systems work because we make them work, and making them work our enduring ethical responsibility.
6- Sit Comfortably With The Mess

“Sitting with the mess before responding to the mess avoids an even larger mess”

We’re all familiar with the old advice, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. This ethical responsibility is a little more complicated. It says, if it seems broken, don’t fix it (yet)! Sit with the mess for a while and learn what the mess suggests before thinking seriously about fixing it.

This advice is sage, counter-intuitive, and danged difficult to follow. For me, perhaps for you, too, most of my meager job satisfaction comes from fixing broken stuff. I’m tidy if not fastidious, and I usually feel compelled to clean up any mess threatening to spread. But I’m learning that my native cleanliness does not always guide me in the direction of godliness. Especially when I step in with nothing beyond a superficial appreciation of the true nature of what seems so obviously messy to my sensibilities.

One man’s mess is another’s coping mechanism. One’s tidy, another’s compulsion. I’m capable of fixing to my own satisfaction while breaking it to almost everyone else’s. What is the nature of this mess, anyway.

Someone told me that that every World War Two Navy fighter plane had a watch embedded in their steering mechanism. The first step in the procedure for starting the plane was “wind the watch.” The first step in every emergency procedure was also “wind the watch.”

The watch never really needed winding in an emergency, but Navy psychologists had learned that the pilot needed to wind a watch when an emergency appeared. This millisecond’s distraction dispersed the unconscious startle response on something that could do no damage, clearing the pilot’s mind to respond to the real emergency.
We wear self-winding watches today, ones that offer no opportunity for dissipating our startles. Yet we are well-advised to consider the wisdom in the Navy flier’s procedure. Like the Hypocratic oath, our first responsibility when responding to any emergency might be to do no harm. Yet our natural startle response will more than likely set us backward rather than propel us forward.

I’ve taken to winding my self-winding watch. When the phone rings to report another emerging mess, rather than rushing to the battlements, I take a deep breath and pull up my left sleeve. I smile quietly to myself, in homage to those Navy pilots who faced greater danger than ever presents itself to me. Then I pinch the watch stem and mentally wind my watch, preparing myself for meeting whatever mess is calling this time by first sitting with the mess for a while.

In closing, I want to make the clear distinction between sitting with the mess and sitting in it. The dictum is not to sit in the mess, but to sit beside it, to learn from it, to understand its nature. This ethical responsibility is difficult for one to do and exponentially harder for a team or a community to pull off. Hand out watches and hold winding drills, anything to encourage not a culture of complacency but one of serenity in the face of messiness. Everyone’s better off when the first responders arrive prepared. This ethical responsibility reminds me that sitting with the mess before responding to the mess avoids an even larger mess.
The Ethical Responsibilities of Project Work - Part Four

This brief series outlines the seven ethical responsibilities of project work.

The first installment made the distinction between morals (You Shall!) and ethics (I Will!), defining ethics as personal choices made when acknowledging the cost of choosing otherwise.

The second installment considered three ethical responsibilities: Acknowledging Blindness, Pursuing With Personal Purpose, and Extending Trust, concluding that when coming to a fork in the road, taking it mindfully makes a real difference.

The third installment introduced three more ethical responsibilities: Making the Most Generous Possible Interpretations, Working The System So The System Can Work, and Sitting Comfortably With The Mess, emphasizing the critical importance of finding something to revere about even the most obvious jerk, the necessity of sometimes making up your own rules, and the value of slowing down long enough to wind your watch before engaging.

This last installment considers the final ethical responsibility, Informed Choice.

Informed Choice

Our ethics make us civilized and our choices make us wise.
Doug Ballon, when he was VP of Project Management Training for Jones, Lang, LaSalle, the largest property management company in the world, included a simple exercise in his Edge PM Training. He auctioned off a dollar bill. He claims that he never sold one for less than a dollar, and always got someone to bid five, ten, even twenty dollars for the privilege of carrying away that buck.

Doug was trading in more than money. Some bought prestige. Others victory. Still others traded to make another lose. The monetary value of the bill had little to do with the winner's choices.

Later, of course, it just seemed weird that anyone would pay twenty dollars for a dollar bill, but the story holds none of the drama of the real situation. Doug was simulating a common project occurrence, where someone trades a valuable cow for a handful of magic beans. Why do we do that?

Justifying the choice gets complicated, especially to those who haven't seen the competition. It seems obvious to them that the winner took leave of his senses, and lost more than his judgment as a result. Doug used the auction to help people become more mindful of how they engage with the world. The winning bidder was usually unaware that their behavior was perfectly representative of what they usually do, but everyone else in the room recognized it immediately.

Many of the choices we make occur just like this. They aren't really deliberate choices, and we feel more the chosen than the chooser. Mindfulness is often the last thing on our mind. Yet, if ethics are a matter of choosing, mindfulness seems a necessary companion. Informed choice, the final ethical responsibility, is all about maintaining mindfulness.

Look at the transcripts of any ethics investigation and you'll find mindlessness run amok, as if mere reflex response had replaced reflective action. A tap on the knee yielding a kick from a foot. And you'll probably see there the universal explanation for every ethical lapse: "It wasn't MY fault!" And it probably wasn't. He wasn't there at the moment of commission. Nobody was. The decision made itself. The choice he made was really no choice at all.

Do I mean to say that I don't always choose to, as the third ethical responsibility prescribes, extend trust? Yes, that's exactly what I mean. I intend to say that ethics are conditional, not absolute. I'm human, so I must rely upon my own situated judgment to inform my choices. Once an ethic crosses the line between consideration and imperative, it renders personal judgment irrelevant and becomes whatever the opposite of
choice might be. If I automatically react or assume that I cannot choose, the result has nothing to do with ethics.

I’m learning to recognize the signs of ethical quicksand. It most often appears as a simple imperative, commanding immediate response. Listen closely then and you’ll hear the tell-tale verbal cue: “We have no choice.” Whatever comes next can quickly compromise.

How is it that we find ourselves in the position where we firmly believe we have no choice? We justify far too easily, and create our own choicelessness as a result. Ours is not to reason why we so easily do this to ourselves, but to develop some workable strategies for side-stepping the quicksand. Mindfulness informs choice.

**Uninformed Choice**

"Uninformed Choice is the most insidious form of slavery."

Projects succeed and fail on the choices made in moments of extremity, when the chips are falling differently than anticipated. They hitch their ride on the back of knowing what to do when you don’t have any idea what to do. On the back of choice.

When you feel as though you have no choice, pay closest attention then and create more choices. How? Outside every box containing that damning illusion of no choice lies an infinite number of not-damning alternatives. Simply choose something from the infinite array of not-damned alternatives and you’re pretty certain to satisfy your ethical responsibilities every time.

Sounds easy and it is, but it’s still a life’s work.

How about a real world example? When the Oregon Farmers’ Markets Association board met to lay out their next year’s projects, one team member stood out for his uncooperativeness. He seemed unnecessarily argumentative, and several times that first morning, held up forward progress with apparently self-serving and clearly self-centered speeches. He seemed, to most in the room, to be the major roadblock to achieving anything, until some canary started complaining out loud, challenging his behavior. Then the rest of the team learned just how deeply he cared about success. How he’d seen several past boards talk a seductive line, then leave all but the major city markets out in the cold. His behavior meant he cared and was scared.

Oh. ... How many had earlier interpreted his behavior to mean ‘deep caring?’ Nobody. What did they do in response? Gather stones in their
pockets, whisper in the hallways, withdraw. A little life lesson in making
more generous interpretations made a big difference. But who saw the
opportunity to make this informed choice? Nobody. The very situation
needing choice seemed to cloak any notion that informed choice could
make any difference. No one had intended to mentally dog pile on who
turned out to be the team’s most passionate member, but everyone piled
on anyway.

I’m learning to sit more comfortably with this mess we call project work,
but I’m no saint, either. I’m still learning to make informed choices. I can
still too easily slip into autopilot and get stuck if only because I expect to
see, or because I demand that someone else motivate me, or because I idle
until someone proves themselves trustworthy, or because I savage without
generosity, or because I expect that system to work without me
intervening, or because I’m preoccupied trying to clean up the endless
mess, or because the moment of choice just slips by unnoticed. I’ve got
other choices. So do we all.

**Choice Point**

“In the moment between perception and action, belief and behavior, lies the
poser to change the world.” Amy Schwab

When I ask a project manager to describe her ethics, I usually get a bit of
mumbled motherhood and some mangled apple pie. Sometimes fife and
drum music wafts in the distant background. I ask to encourage her
mindfulness, not to test her knowledge of what’s wrong and right. I
couldn’t possibly know for her, and neither of us are situated, in that
moment, to choose exactly what either of us should do. I am genuinely
curious, though, how she will go about choosing when that moment
comes.

Much of what I do when I’m invited to consult with a project involves
telling no one what to do. I very often find the project stuck in what they
believed they were supposed to be able to do, making poorly-informed
choices. Rather than accepting another for who they are, for instance,
they are trying to reform him, with little but frustration to show for their
well-intended efforts.

I speak then about opportunities for Extending Trust or Making The Most
Generous Possible Interpretation, reframing their frustration as ‘a severe
case of the normals.’ Everyone already knows how to trust and how to be
generous, but we miss when to deploy these skills. I’ve spent enough of my
own life mindless to understand how that can limit perspective,
encouraging uninformed choice.
So I ask rather than insist. I’m opening space for them to make their own choices, understanding that their judgment has little to take root in without some mindful choosing. What the guide said they were supposed to do always needs some situated interpretation.

I speak of ethics to invite choice. We get to navigate through a world overflowing with misinformation. If we cannot believe the road signs, then we must trust our own good judgment. We can depend upon the world being just as it always has been: endlessly surprising. Finding our moments of mindfulness to make informed choices might be the best leverage anyone could wish for.

I secretly wish that everyone engaging in project work understood the crucial importance of their own ethical responsibilities. Not because they are likely to be indicted for ethical violations, but because this understanding makes a real difference in their own experience. Project communities work together better when those within the community understand that they are in charge—no matter who was supposed to be in charge—and responsible for making their own informed choices, able to untangle their own knots, and actively choosing.

And it’s not impossible to get people thinking this way. It’s one heck of a lot easier than telling them what to do. I might complain about how my organization treats me like a mindless resource and miss the subtle but infinitely more important point that I tend to treat myself that way:

- expecting to see clear direction when we’re all naturally blind,
- waiting impatiently for my work to inspire me when I’ve failed to inspire myself,
- hoping against hope that the rest of the team will live up to my highest aspirations for them when I could accept them for who and what they are,
- frustrated by the absolute jerks blocking me when my own reaction to them has more influence on our project than their behavior ever could,
- fed-up with the cookbook that never has worked when I could give myself permission to act like a chef,
- and endlessly failing to contain a mess that was unlikely to ever hurt anyone.

I have the mobility my choices bring only if I remain mindful that I always, always, always have choices. They are mine to make, and no others.

I carry a Zuni fetish in my pocket to help remind me to stay mindful. Others practice Fung Shui or consult Tarot cards or toss I ching coins or self-administer a two by four to their own forehead. Whatever you use,
stay alert. Even this fleeting moment might be your choice point, and choosing now might just make all the difference.

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