Making time for Emotional Intelligence in Production and Technology

Claudia E. Davis
claudia.davis@yale.edu
Yale University
New Haven, CT

ABSTRACT

During the SIGGRAPH 2018 BOF "Emphasizing Empathy in Pipeline Project Management," group consensus stated that highly effective project management can only be achieved when emphasis is placed on demonstrated empathy for any and all project contributors at the project management level and when challenges are framed as opportunities to enhance both the team and the project manager's own emotional intelligence. The reality faced in the industry, however, can present unique challenges, specifically relating to toxic cultural folkways, lack of leadership support, and lack of designated monetary resources. Based on subsequent discussions borne from the initial presentation with industry professionals and team leaders, it seems imperative to address not only the theories of Emotional Intelligence in greater depth, but also to acknowledge the potential obstacles in applying this basic theory in the real world specifically regarding the operational changes introduced to the working environment due to COVID-19 and current world events.

A specific concern to address is that middle-tier management, for whom budget allocation is given and not guaranteed – want to improve their team environment, they are often not granted a financial allotment to do so most effectively for their specific teams. This talk aims to illuminate opportunities for individual production professionals to make effective changes pertaining to their management and communication styles to affect positive change in their work environment, increase employee morale, and build community, barring financial allotment, to the overall benefit of their team members and their project health.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Project and people management**; **Project management techniques**; **Employment issues**; **Codes of ethics**; **Employment issues**; *Computing education.*

KEYWORDS

project management, empathy, emotional intelligence, advocacy, community building, professional development, work-life balance, pipeline, development

1 INTRODUCTION

When this topic was first explored at SIGGRAPH 2018 in the Birds of a Feather session "Emphasizing Empathy in the Pipeline Process," many attendees echoed challenges and expressed a like-minded frustration with their inability to change their working communities due to a lack of support from their leadership for professional development in this area. Most striking was the noted tendency of the attendees to hide their struggle with this topic often falsely under the impression that their concerns were wholly unique to their team or teams within their company alone - rather than a one inherent to the dynamics of the production and technology industry as a whole.

History has shown, however, many examples indicating that a traditional pipeline process pushes teams too far to meet their deadlines, and that the current industry climate is often breeds a particular type of toxicity that can lend itself to abuse [Amidi 2018] [Goldberg 2018];[Lanier 2018] [Wolfe 2018]. By the end of the discussion in 2018, it was agreed that there is a greater need for education in emotional intelligence for professionals entering the industry, especially those at the project, team, and middle-tier management level.

The subsequent talk at SIGGRAPH 2019, "Enhancing Emotional Intelligence in Project Management: Strategies for Better Outcomes and Community with Limited Financial Overhead" served as a primer for those managers who had expressed interest in building the skills necessary to improve the environments in which they work. [Davis 2019] Guided by fundamental principles in psychology and sociology [Maslow 1943] [Sumner 1906], theories of emotional intelligence [Salovey and Mayer 1990] [Goleman 2007] [Gardner 2011], and documented social phenomena [Strawhun 2016] [Cimino 2011] [Sweet 1999], the objective of this talk was to provide basic tools and strategies for project managers who are interested in assessing their project planning techniques to include proactive and emotionally intelligent methods.

The main thesis underscoring these presentations remains that the most effective project management can only be achieved when those at the project management or lead level place an emphasis on demonstrated compassionate empathy for any and all of their project contributors, including planning individual work capacity proactively, and embracing challenging work dynamics as opportunities to enhance both the team and the project manager's own

emotional intelligence [Davis 2019]. The primer ensured individuals had the language to mindfully discuss the obstacles they faced in their own environments and the proper terminology to seek out resources that would help them to learn more about the topic after the conference. Like in 2018, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Participants in the supplemental BOF, "Implementing Empathy in Project Management" voiced that the sessions allowed them to interact with individuals from different specialties in order to brainstorm strategies they had found effective across disciplines and provide new perspectives and insights to other like minded participants.

The reaction from participants during SIGGRAPH 2019, while tremendously positive, was at the same time very cautious. Participants would often ask to speak about a particular issue only via follow up rather than engaging with the group. Some felt compelled to reaffirm that they were not being recorded during the BOF. One participant even refused to introduce themself to the group, later noting that they were afraid of retribution from their employer and colleagues for having discussed issues regarding less than positive aspects of the company culture. This behavior indicates a larger issue - as an industry, is toxicity the tip of the iceberg?[Gabriel 2019] Are we nurturing a culture of fear? By looking at the issues outlined in the SIGGRAPH 2019 talk, specifically those regarding the way toxicity is normalized in the industry [Davis 2019], the aspects of managerial communication that contribute to the inability for individuals to feel secure and ultimately satisfied in their work can be elucidated in greater depth - as can positive changes made within the past year that upend this mentality and promote healthy workplace culture.

2   APPLICATIONS

As noted in the 2019 talk, in attempt to change this norm, steps must first be taken at the individual level: challenging one's own personal perceptions, advocating for one's direct reports and colleagues, thinking mindfully about the quantifiable ways in which one may report the outcomes of emotionally intelligent strategies to leadership, and continuing the discussion openly with others in similar positions. Building on the content in prior sessions, the talk will be a robust examination of theoretical modeling, particularly focusing on acquisition and absorption mentality, the effects of sporadic and casual contract work on employee security, methods of data collection and surveillance concerns, HR focus and prevalence, and positive models in employee support.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it must be noted that the current model of project management has shifted companies primarily to facilitation via telework platforms (i.e. Slack, Zoom, etc). This has inherently caused some of the methods in the primer to become standard practice, at best, otherwise further illuminating the challenges that were already the focus of these sessions specifically: clear and personal communication, the importance of personal engagement with team members, advocacy on behalf of direct reports, and mindfully communicated project plans and needs. COVID-19 has changed the way we manage and the needs that must be met in the workplace to feel secure in a world climate of increasing instability. It is the intention of this talk to explore the original ideas presented in 2018 and 2019 through this new lens - focusing particularly on strategies for mindful communication through new and more impersonal channels, the increased need for attention paid towards training and support, and issues surrounding employee isolation, virtual culture building, and navigating grief, trauma, and anxiety in the workplace for individualized and proactive capacity planning.

Eventually, it would be a great relief if this discourse becomes more openly accepted in the industry - enough that panelists could feel empowered to participate in a group venture on behalf of leaders in the industry, as suggested in the reviews from last year. Change, however, does not happen overnight - and it is clear that the topic of emotional intelligence in project management still carries with it some stigma discouraging many individuals from speaking about their experiences openly enough to create large scale change. There is still work that must be done. Until then, even small steps should be celebrated as giant victories.

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