

Enhancing Emotional Intelligence in Project Management

Strategies for Better Outcomes and Community with Limited Financial Overhead

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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. This talk aims to illuminate opportunities for individual production professionals to both challenge their own perceptions of the industry culture and 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

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1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the animation industry, there are many examples of animators and teams striving past what is physically advisable in order to meet a deadline. In the end, the traditional pipeline process pushes teams to, at all costs, create a finished product in a given deadline.

While this standard has been augmented to include slack time as a fail safe for external life events and the human elements, 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 most effective project management can only be achieved when emphasis is placed on demonstrated empathy by those at the project management level for any and all project contributors, capacity planning is completed proactively, and when challenges are framed as opportunities to enhance both the team and the project manager's own emotional intelligence.

In 1937 worker dissatisfaction with wages, project planning, and work conditions led to the first animation Union contract signed between Max Fleisher Studios and CADU [839 2008][Pointer 2017]. The establishment of such unions in the industry was often in response to persistent worker unrest, famously detailed in Tom Sito's book "Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson," [Sito 2006].

Though in more recent history large-scale protests are often avoided, this does not mean that the problems with work dissatisfaction and unrest are not just as prevalent or dire. Consider the following major incidents, which have happened within the past year: Antitrust violations in LA involving 8 production houses (only recently settled in 2018) [Amidi 2018];[LLC 2018]; working conditions and alleged 100 hour weeks prior to the release of Red Dead Redemption in 2018 [Goldberg 2018];[Lanier 2018]; and even more recently, a lawsuit alleging gender discrimination at Riot Games, brought November 2018 [Wolfe 2018] (which itself represents a wholly unique category of toxicity with which workers in the industry must contend that cannot be explored sufficiently within the defined confines of this talk).

The continued pattern of such incidents indicates that the problem is systemic in nature, rooted in both the style of project plan widely used in the industry and a toxic mentality that elevates harsh working conditions as a badge of honor. This tradition of "suffering as proof of worth" allows the problem to go unaddressed, and, as shown briefly above, reaches so far back into production history, that it is often unwittingly supported by the most senior members of a project or company.

At SIGGRAPH 2018, this topic was explored in the Birds of a Feather session "Emphasizing Empathy in the Pipeline Process,"

which expanded on observations that emotionally intelligent project management applications implemented in the Massive Collaborative Animation Projects (MCAP) initiative [Aoki et al. 2017] that were ultimately successful in improving the student experience and enhancing project outcomes. The discussion at SIGGRAPH 2018 broadened the implications of the MCAP strategy to the current industry environment.

The reception of the discussion at SIGGRAPH was overwhelming, with participants from many different specialties disclosing experiences echoing those faced by the students in MCAP - and with greater consequences. Many individuals also expressed frustration with their inability to change their working community due to a lack of support from their leadership for professional development in this area.

Additionally, many of the attendees of the discussion had processed these obstacles privately, falsely under the impression that their concerns were wholly unique to their team or teams within their company. Some operated under the impression that the issues they observed were indicative of their own limitations in management capabilities rather than a reflection of the widespread toxicity of the current industry work climate.

Guided by foundational 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 is to not only provide resources and strategies for project managers who are interested in assessing their project planning techniques to include proactive and emotionally intelligent methods, but also those who are facing current obstacles within their work environment and are looking for guidance that may not at this time be provided by the leadership within their company.

Additionally, this talk seeks to affect change through the discussion itself. There is immeasurable value in encouraging individuals to openly discuss the issues they are experiencing in their work environment, rather than hide them in order to avoid appearing susceptible to an invalid industry perceived weakness. Discussion, by nature, promotes collaboration with others in similar positions about strategies they have found effective and offer new perspectives and insights to thoughtful participants. In order to upend the perceived norm, the discussion of change itself should be supported within professional venues like SIGGRAPH, and support and resources provided freely and openly to extend the discussion and benefit outward ever after.

2 FUTURE APPLICATIONS

In attempt to change this norm, steps must first be taken at the individual level to challenge personal perceptions, advocate for employees, self report emotionally intelligent strategies and outcomes to leadership, and continue the discussion outwardly with others in similar positions. To this end, a venue has been established to grow an online community and forum allowing individuals with interest in developing and implementing emotionally intelligent management strategies to privately collaborate, connect, and share their experiences outside of the restrictions of their own personal work environments. This resource can be found at

<http://www.eicommunity.org>. At this stage, submissions are encouraged, but it should be noted that all submissions will be moderated prior to posting to protect any desired anonymity or community guidelines.

By allowing this discussion to flourish outside of the workplace, individuals' can have the opportunity to increase their own awareness, exercise their ability to communicate about these issues effectively, expand their personal perspectives, and learn meaningful strategies to better their workplace, morale, and project health without compromising their budget, therefore setting a new standard for collaborative management and cross-team empathy grown organically throughout the industry.

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