

TOWARDS A MORE PLAYFUL APPROACH TO CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT

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The author argues that applying some of the philosophy and practices of play to construction management would enhance creativity, humour and job satisfaction at work, leading to more successful projects. The paper promotes the concept of a play society, emphasising living creatively and rearranging economic and social aspects of life to support this. It sees a playful approach as bridging the gap between results-driven management and meaning-driven employees in the world of construction. Project development may be viewed as a game (with clearly defined rules) rather than as merely a set of procedures to be followed rigorously. The play analogy of the construction process is appropriate in that it has specific rules (i.e. conditions of contract and relevant regulations) and objectives to be achieved in terms of completion to time, cost and quality targets. The concept of a "Catholic" Play Ethic is proposed as a counterpoint to Weber's Protestant Work Ethic. The Work Ethic has been described as a tough adversary because it represents the spirit of capitalism. This is useful to the governing classes of early twenty-first century market democracies because it has the time-honoured effect of imposing social order. The current UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown is a foremost advocate of this approach to industrial activity, following in the footsteps of the likes of Thomas Carlyle, John Calvin and St Paul. The author presents his personal views on how the construction industry might benefit from a more playful approach to its core business whilst enhancing relationships with its clients. The broad thesis is that the ideal machine bureaucracy is ill-suited to the rather chaotic (in the true sense of the word) realm of a construction project. It is suggested that the application of a more playful ethos to the serious business of construction management should cope better than the present approach, given the inevitable challenges and obstacles encountered during the evolution of a project.

Keywords: construction, culture, ethic, play.

INTRODUCTION

“Work is too important to be taken seriously!” is a paraphrasing of a famous saying by Bill Shankly, the legendary former manager of Liverpool FC. Work has been claimed to be as natural as rest or play. So why should work not be treated as a form of play? When Kipling wrote about the “joy of working,” he prefaced this with “no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame, but each for the joy of working.” (When Earth's last picture is painted, 1932).

“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players!” wrote Shakespeare in “As You Like It”. He viewed every stage of life as being “played”, and would not consider “playing at work” to be an anomaly. So work should be

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enjoyable, it should be fun – at least most of the time. It should involve a generous amount of “play”.

The noun “play” has a considerable number of meanings –depending on the size of the dictionary consulted. By comparison, the definition of the adjective “playful” in the Chambers Dictionary (9th Ed) is limited to “full of fun, frolicsome, frisky, high-spirited, humorous”. The purpose of this paper is to review the applications of playfulness to the work of construction management – as humour, as informality, as chaos, as learning, as gaming and as a system of risk management. It will explore the development of an ethic of play within the working environment, examining the cultures prevailing within the construction industry. The outcomes of play, developing creativity and satisfaction, are welcome within the world of work. More than most occupations, the role of construction management simulates game-play, with its rules embodied in conditions of contracts and its aim being the successful completion of a project to specified or agreed targets, As the author used to say when managing his own projects, “this is almost the most fun one can have, without risking one’s own money or one’s life!”

Play and humour

Whilst not all play, nor indeed all humour, is truly light-hearted, there is a place for playful humour within construction management, as argued by the author (Gunning, 1996). Bokum (1986) has stressed the need for humour as a means of offering us a more realistic vision of ourselves and of the world around us, stripped of our self-imposed fears and frustrations. A sense of humour, he argues, provides us with the ability to cope with the tribulations of everyday life – both at work and outside it. A humorous perspective on one’s problems allows one to take them less seriously, and to deal with them more effectively. It is an appropriate method of mitigating stress, promoting a greater enjoyment of positive life experiences and enhancing self-image for most people. Hence there would appear to be little controversial about judicious use of playful humour in a work context. It should not be over-used or abused, as this may detract from the seriousness with which the humorist is perceived by colleagues.

In the words of Norrick (1993), “everyday conversation thrives on wordplay, sarcasm, anecdotes and jokes”. Humour is a shared experience in most instances, and skill in its use is a useful attribute for a manager in the course of his duties, since most of his work involves communication in one forum or another, either face to face or in writing.

Foot (2001) has reviewed the motives for using humour – as a search for information or social acceptance, as a means of giving information (self- disclosure, self- presentation, denial/de- commitment or unmasking hypocrisy), as a method of interpersonal control (expressing liking or dislike, in quotation or directing a discussion), as a means of group control, for the relief of anxiety or embarrassment, or as a means of changing or pressuring the status quo by challenging convention or reinforcing attitudes. These motives can be seen as having useful applications within the management of the construction process.

Play and Informality

Applebaum (1984) was of the opinion that the informal organisation was essential in getting physical work done on a building site, whilst the formal organisation was needed for the administration of a project. Schein (1992) considered that “leaders” create the appropriate culture for particular work, within which managers and

administrators function. In other words, true leaders develop the appropriate degree of informality around them. Applebaum argued that bureaucratic management and a rational, impersonal style of management would not prove effective within the dynamic context of a construction project.

Stacey (2003) regarded both formal and informal systems as equal interactions into an evolving core which is the organisation. He supported any system with good quality interactions that evolve into a healthy organisation, rather than a conformant bureaucracy or a confrontational environment. A healthy informal mid-range between these two unhealthy extremes permits free flow of ideas, promoting creativity and co-operation. Understanding organisations as “complex responsive processes of relating, both formally and informally” (Stacey 2003), leads one to support at least a measure of playful informality within construction projects.

There remains the task of ensuring that the informal organisation, which exists in all work situations with a social element, does not act dysfunctionally against the interests of the project. Given the positive nature of most of the individuals who choose to work in the construction industry, this should not be a difficult task. It is clear that playful informality is an integral element in the successful management of a construction project and should be more widely recognised as such. The recent (March 2008) debate on formal versus informal control systems in construction within the CNBR network of construction management academics confirms this view.

Play and chaos

Gunning (1996) has examined the relationship between the emerging theory of chaos and the management of construction. He argues that the combination of unpredictability and underlying order which characterises construction, presents a complex dynamic system which is the embodiment of chaos in a true scientific sense.

In *Thriving on Chaos*, Peters (1987), called for a revolution in management thinking to deal proactively with the unprecedented and accelerating open-ended change which was emerging towards the end of the twentieth century. As a Civil Engineer, Peters recognised that chaos in construction projects was not a new phenomenon, and that it required a more “seat-of the pants” style of management than traditional, stable businesses. To an extent, he was merely calling on all managers to adopt some of the cultures and practices of construction managers, with employment of lower-level staff, decentralisation and simpler, flatter organisation structures.

Hence, one might argue that construction projects were prototypes for modern chaotic business systems which have been widely researched in recent years. Behaviour at play may be viewed as a dynamic non-linear system which cannot be accurately predicted or modelled by traditional mathematics or physics. Play can be complex, attempting to develop order out of a period of turbulence and creativity; it can be spontaneous, adoptive and lively. In many ways, play can be seen as a metaphor for the construction process, with structures evolving out of apparent chaos.

Chaos theory, with associated approaches of complexity theory and compatibility theory (Penrose, 1991), casts doubt on the continuing applicability of the classical view of management. Reliance upon detail and control is being replaced by a focus on involvement and commitment within an uncertain environment such as a construction project. A softer approach is more likely to thrive under such conditions, where receptivity to continuous change is promoted by an attitude of flexibility, energy and tolerance of paradox such as exists in the chaotic world of play.

Play and learning

Few would argue that children learn a vast amount from their play. The concept of structured play has been prominent in nursery/early primary level education for decades. In “Structuring Play in the Early Years at School,” Manning and Sharp (1979) advise that teachers should closely observe spontaneous play before structuring it through provision of resources, active participation as required, initiation of new ideas to promote learning, and intervention when necessary to prevent disruptive behaviour.

As a former site manager, the author can readily identify with use of these four strands of structured play in supervising the workforce through;

Provision of adequate resources, including information and time

Active participation as an equal, offering suggestions and advice rather than formal directions, so far as possible

Initiation of new experiences and concepts, through development of knowledge and skills, and promoting creativity through challenges

Intervention, as a last resort, to facilitate achievement of objectives.

Equally, from the author’s current perspective as a lecturer in construction management, these four strands of structured play provide one way of examining one’s pedagogic functions, particularly at post-graduate level.

Every effective construction manager has a duty to train his immediate subordinates and to ensure that all of his workforce are capable of doing their jobs well. A playful yet semi-structured approach to learning on the job has obvious benefits for all concerned with project success, as well as with personal development. Learning occurs best during difficult and challenging activities such as complex play. Thomas and Hockey (2003) have charged adults with “colonising and commercialising childhood”. Furedi (2001) criticised the over-regulation of children’s play by parents and teachers, which discourages them from exploring their immediate social environment and rigidly sets the agenda for their play. These actions diminish the key competences of play, which are as follows: establishing independence, learning to perform, developing social networks and stimulating imagination. All of these essentials of play may also be viewed as requirements of effective work, not least in the sphere of construction (itself a frequent element in children’s’ play.)

It is important to retain the principal competences of play into adulthood and to apply them, both at work and beyond, in order to realise one’s potential in life. The modern concept of life-long learning requires a philosophy of life-long play in attitudes to self- development and career performance. However this goes against the traditional conditioning of the educational system. The concept of the workplace as a learning organisation that copes well with social, technological or economic change, has been promoted by Garratt (1987) etc.

The construction project team may be regarded as the epitome of a learning organisation, if participants are able to carry forward lessons from previous projects and share these, in a spirit of action learning (Revans, 1987). Modern application of this approach might be seen in value management workshops, quality circles, safety forums and project planning meetings. Receptivity to continuing change throughout a project can be enhanced through developing a culture of joint learning and supportive playfulness.

Play as Gaming

“Play up! Play up! and play the game” is widely quoted line from Victorian Sir Henry Newbolt. Whilst there has never been a time without games - as evidenced by the authors of the Old Testament and by archaeologists, amongst others - modern technology has led to the generation born after 1970 growing up with a finger on the keyboard or the games console – for better or worse.

This “gamer generation” sees games as a perfectly valid tool for solving problems, relating to other human beings and discovering one’s identity. The older generation tends to view games as diversionary toys, to be put away in adulthood as “childish things,” as noted by St Paul. Games have become a consumer experience (Beck and Wade, 2004), but they put the player in direct control of situations, partaking of “reality” and playing on powerful emotions. Despite their artificiality, they afford a sense of freedom to players and develop problem-solving skills, concentration and memory. The downside is that they may discourage the pleasures of interacting with live human beings, although joint games are increasingly popular, relying on collaboration or competition.

The modern generation (born post 1970) claim with growing confidence to be expert players, whether their experience is gained through electronic technology or through more traditional board, card or ball games; (sadly street games appear to be dwindling in popularity because of increased traffic, more protective parenting, or the lure of technology). Hence the developing workforce should respond well, like current students, to a more playful approach to direction of their efforts.

Beck and Wade, (2004) of the Harvard Business School see the gamer generation as a different type of employee, confident with risk and surprise, regarding simulation and fantasy as useful tools rather than as distractions. These employees view play as taking reality lightly. They expect the world of work to be more demanding in use of their skills and imagination in this age of information. This is why a more playful approach to construction management would be of greater consequence and relevance to the emerging workforce. Without this, apathy, alienation and frustration await the coming generation of construction employees.

Huizinga (1971) has argued that the greatest achievements of civilisation in philosophy, art, law, politics and science are essentially the outcome of playful contest and debate. Their weapons in the contest are the techniques of play - imagination, simulation, chance and irony. The analogy of sport in modern society, with its extravagantly remunerated heroes, embodies how skill and commitment triumph through “victory”. Huizinga (1971) emphasised the non-triviality of certain types of play, and games are increasingly recognised as developing essential skills. Perhaps this is merely a modern adaptation of Wellington’s view that “the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton”. The author’s extensive experience in board games such as Chess and in card games such as Poker confirm that a range of cognitive and emotional skills may be developed through more cerebral pursuits than physical sport, helpful though the latter undoubtedly is. Games can act as much more than trivial pursuits, in personal development and training in creative problem solving skills.

Poker expert Binmore (2007) narrates how sceptical businessmen radically altered their view of game theory when this proved decisive in designing the rules of the sensationally successful auctioning games used in USA and UK for selling the rights to use various radio frequencies for use with cellular telephones. He has outlined how

games are played everywhere, from economics to evolutionary biology, from psychology to politics. John Banham, former Director of the Confederation of British Industry, has been quoted as saying “as well as a good academic record, I look for people who have climbed mountains, or been captain of the tiddlywinks team at university – people whom other people will follow”, (Malone, 2005). Peter Drucker, when asked by a manager which skills he should learn in order to become a better manager, is said to have replied; “Learn how to play the violin”. Both mental and physical aspects of play may stimulate soft divergent, “right-brain” thinking, promoting both learning and innovation.

Play and Risk Management

A risk is an event that may or may not occur, based upon an established level of probability. Techniques of managing risk in construction projects are numerous and diverse, incorporating identification, analysis and response. Whilst use of deterministic solutions to stochastic problems has justifiably been criticised (Gunning, 1999), social aspects of risk and the inherent subjectivity of much estimation of probability can be mirrored in the behaviour adopted during play. A pragmatic, heuristic approach, based on personal experience, intuition and judgement has been found by Edwards and Bowen (1990) to be the dominant approach to risk management within the construction industry. This approach is founded upon the “soft” skills of human behaviour that are developed through play, amongst other activities. Using construction projects as learning organisations requires a playful attitude to be adopted, along with a cooperative, team-working outlook from all concerned.

Like risk management, play itself can be a combination of art and science. No game with scientific certainty about its outcome will hold the attention of a player once he has determined how to apply the science with a guaranteed outcome. It must retain some element of chance or uncertainty, perhaps related to the other player or players, in order to provide a sense of achievement if one is successful in the game. Despite the Olympian ideal of glory in mere participation, the optimum satisfaction is only gained by success; the risk of not winning must be present to make success worthwhile.

Equally, effective risk management requires artfulness in applying an inexact science to complex, unpredictable events such as occur continually within the construction process. A creative, playful approach will generate a wider range of options to be reviewed when selecting the appropriate response or solution to a problem with an element of risk of “failure”.

The Ethics of Play

In the words of Oscar Wilde, “one should always play fairly when one has the winning cards!” Like many of his sayings, this is more of a swipe at the hypocrisy and flexible ethicality of society rather than advice to be taken literally. Ethical behaviour in play means adhering to the rules of the game, trying one’s best for any team-mates and consistently striving to beat the “opposition” and achieve the desired outcome. This is a rephrasing of what is expected from management, be it of construction or any other aspect of industry or commerce. Openness, integrity and trust are essential between both workmates and play-fellows alike.

Whether at work or outside of it, people remain essentially the same in their attitudes to ethical and moral values. There is little to distinguish between the behaviour

expected in either situation. A more workmanlike approach to play may prove equally effective as a more playful approach to work, and each may enhance both satisfaction and success.

The Play Ethic

An ethic is defined in the Chambers Dictionary (2003) as a “system of rules of behaviour”. Kane (2004) has argued that the work ethic of the past three centuries is poorly equipped to deal with the modern world and calls for a more playful society where the anxiety and stress of twenty-first century living and working are replaced by the joy and excitement of the world of play.

“Child’s play” is a term used to denote something that is deemed to be easy to do. Groucho Marx is reported (Malone, 2005) as declaring; “Why, a four-year old child could understand this contract! Run out and find me a four-year-old child. I can make neither head nor tail out of it!” Robert Oppenheimer, the father of atomic research in the USA in the 1940s is quoted as stating that; “there are children playing in the street who could solve some of my top problems in Physics, because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago”. St Luke wrote that the “children of this world are, in their generation, wiser than the children of light”.

In other words, rediscovering the perceptions of youth and overcoming the conditioning of education (a state-controlled manufactory of echoes) are required to reactivate spontaneity and realise one’s creative potential. Henry (1991) has claimed that creative ideas will flow where new ideas are welcomed, and where people are encouraged to “play”, rather than to be strictly controlled by their superiors.

Gunning (1994) has summarised the playful manager as:

- having a cognitive preference for using intuition,
- preferring Dionysius as his “God of Management”,
- adopting a “Person” culture within a “Constellation” structure or organisation,
- adopting a prospecting and encouraging style of management,
- focusing on intrinsic satisfaction,
- learning in an activist style, and
- prioritising autonomy, individualism and quality

This playful approach requires a broader view to be taken of success, emphasising social achievement alongside the attainment of project goals. Kane (2004) identifies the need for a strong set of principles (an ethic of play) to mobilise for change and to legitimise an order that emphasises experiment over routine, and self-realisation over self-division. A unity of diversity, desirable on any construction project that brings together people from a wide range of professions and trades, can achieve synergy and optimise group performance through an ethic of play.

In some ways, this is the antithesis of Weber’s (1930) Protestant Work Ethic, that idealises the concept of a machine-like bureaucracy as the most efficient form of administrative management. As a counterpoint to this set of principles, the author wants to promote the idea of a “Catholic” Play Ethic, which might inspire society to a more richly playful future. The joyous idealism of much popular culture already contains the spirit of such a set of moral values, although many might call for some of the excesses of this culture to be curbed. This is understandable, but there needs to be a contrast to Gordon Brown’s Presbyterian espousal of Victorian values through

“revitalisation of the work ethic”. Mankind will not have progressed far if the ethos of the industrial revolution is to continue unchallenged into the information age.

Sardar (2003), a British Muslim, and Rushkoff (2002), a Jewish American, have been cited by Kane (2004) as reengineering their faiths in the context of the information age. Both would regard the more progressive elements of their respective faiths as also containing elements of carnival and “the joy of play”, although their perspectives clearly differ in detail. Sutton-Smith has described the Hindu version of the universe, where “the world is played with by gods, including the interior and exterior lives of people”. Hence all of the major world religions can be seen as claiming to extend beyond the “Work Ethic” to a more spiritual, humane society where the rhetorics of play are practiced freely.

The Rhetorics of Play

Sutton-Smith (1999), in “The Ambiguity of Play,” submitted that there are 7 general themes or traditions of play, which he called “play rhetorics” and divided into two groups. The three “modern rhetorics” he defined as being play as Progress, play as Imagination and play as Individuality. The three “ancient rhetorics” were categorised as play as Power, play as Identity and play as Fate.

He left until last, the stereotype of play as Frivolity, which he sees as both modern and ancient and as a defence against social authority and power. An example of this might be seen in the practice of medieval rulers to maintain a “Fool” to prevent them from taking matters (and themselves) totally seriously. (This was not a common practice in England, particularly post-Reformation!). Sutton-Smith (1999) considers the ancient rhetorics as representing a vision of players governed by forces largely beyond their control; the modern rhetorics are seen as the embodiment of human freedom, with players displaying confidence, passion and imagination in the face of an unpredictable, competitive future. There is a complex relationship between all 7 forms of play identified by Sutton-Smith, and these can be combined within the play ethic promoted so ably by Kane (2004).

The multiplicity of play rhetorics above represents an ontological diversity. This ever-changing world requires us to be both pro-active and reactive. Handleman (2001) has defined playfulness as “the very openness that enables us to enter into the realities of play, being more embodied feeling and aesthetic than it is cognition”. In other words it represents an attitude of mind, encapsulated in Rousseau’s view that “work and play are all one – so long as both are carried out with the charm of freedom” (Cohen, 1993). Dewey has been quoted in Moyles (1994) as redefining work as ideally “something akin to play, being voluntary, spontaneous, authentic and purposeful – both social and utilitarian”. Certainly, this is the opposite of toil or drudgery.

Kane (2004) has defined an ethic of play as one that makes a virtue out of uncertainty. He cites Schrodinger as declaring that “play, art and science are the spheres of human activity where the action is not rule-determined by the aims imposed by the necessities of life”. Modern science has brought about a “quantum culture” of unpredictability that requires a ludic view to understand and cope with its complexity.

The function of “adult” play is to remain adaptable, optimistic and vigorous within a demanding world that remains essentially work-based and authoritarian. Kane (2004) has postulated a general theory of play, to “prise loose the grip of industrial society from informational society”. In other words, he is calling for the spirit of capitalism

to be replaced by a spirit of social dynamism (Fukuyama, 1999), expressive democracy employing intellectual capital (Negri, 2002), and a sustainable, secure and truly caring society. It remains to be seen if this is fully achievable, but a start has been made.

CONCLUSION

This essay has reviewed some aspects of a much wider concept. A totally new social rationale should be the target, requiring everyone to re-think their working lives in a way which welcomes uncertainty and expands their possibilities. The development of a playful industrial culture, with rights and freedoms coupled with an obligation to care for others in need, would appear to be timely, particularly when the world appears to be facing something of a global recession and credit crunch as well as global threats to its security. Unfortunately the latter diverts attention from the former and can be used to justify a certain degree of repression, or at least regulation. This should be resisted, and a construction industry with a more inclusive, less regulated identity should be the aim. An emerging culture should develop within the industry, focused upon the softer skills of management and with greater participation at every level. This playful ethos should make the work itself more creative and satisfying and the process more successful, to the benefit of all concerned.

Note: Readers who are interested in Pat Kane's play ethic concept are invited to contact his web site www.theplayethic.com.

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