True North project guidance strategies   www.projectcommunity.com

Compass

One Continuous Mistake

"Great project work should create a personal experience that feels like you're making one continuous mistake. Otherwise, you're probably unconscious."

If you were a fly on the wall at one of our Mastering Projects Workshops, you'd see people walking backward, sorting toys, and playing "Show and Tell." Why? We're trying to simulate real project work. Talking about project work doesn't bring any real work into the classroom. To bring in real work, we create situations where people can interact and catch themselves being themselves. Interactive simulations provide opportunities for creating muscle memory, and muscle memory proves more useful than models or concepts when the participants return to their real world practice.

Our project simulations highlight a simple fact: Give a group a difficult problem and they will try to solve it before defining it. So many different groups have responded like this that I've concluded that humans are hardwired this way. What does their quick solution get them? A brief

experience of success followed by an extended period of distress.

The distress comes from throwing away their first solution. They discard it because just does not work. It never does. Something in the way they derive it taints it. Sometimes it represents only the strongest personality's perspective. Other times it is just the easiest to agree on and not what anyone really wanted. It most often represents a bright idea that was not destined to survive anywhere. It's an agreeable but unworkable solution.

Most have an 'Oh Sh**!' episode when they discover their first solution failing. Emotions boil over. Some leave. Others blame. Most blankly stare as if despairing of ever finding their way again.

If you attended the workshop, this would be the moment for catching yourself being yourself. Your muscle memory catches something typical but especially significant in your response here. Your
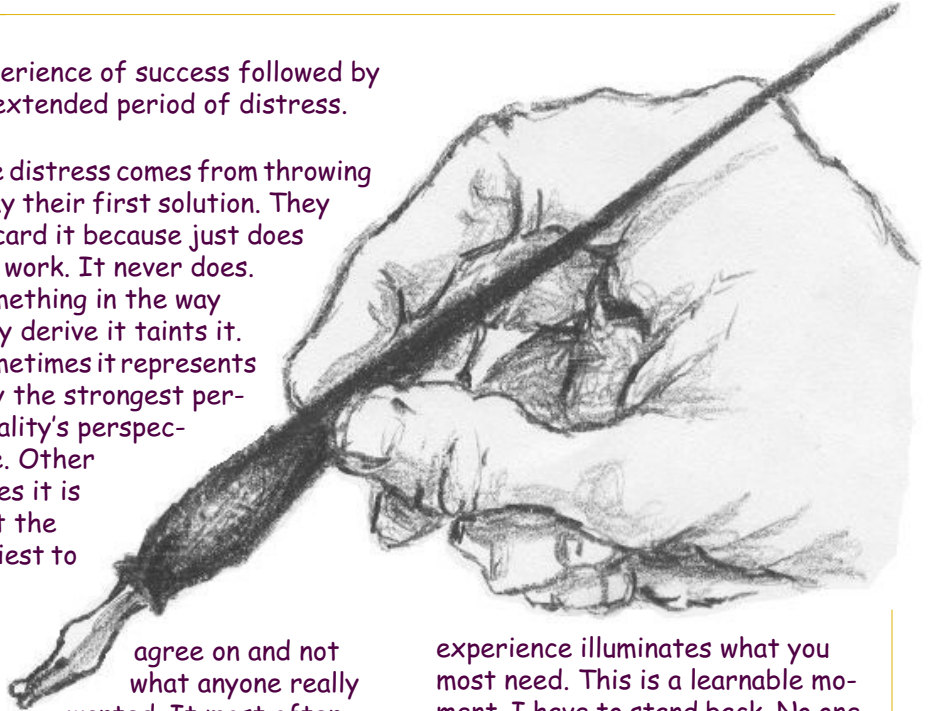
experience illuminates what you most need. This is a learnable moment. I have to stand back. No one needs my teaching here. Within this unexpected and unappreciated event, you might watch yourself going unconscious while your neighbor boils over and someone across the room lashes out, mistaking her discomfort for someone else's problem. Some laugh as if they are enjoying the experience.

But no one really enjoys this part of the workshop, although most discover delight before they've finished. Everyone finds it hard to stay engaged through this messy part. Those who stay engaged discover something delightful waiting for them on the other side.

Who's Responsible?

People arrive at the workshop with complaints and stories. Many are stuck focusing "out there" toward some obviously culpable person or situation. No one arrives saying, "I'm standing on my own garden hose complaining about the municipal water pressure." Yet the workshop simulations often elicit this realization. People observe themselves detailing requirements before understanding their project's context. They catch themselves following some familiar method simply because that's what they've always done. The difference is not first in what they do but in catching themselves doing something.

The simulations create opportunities for people to become aware of what they actually do. No opportunity for changing can exist without this awareness.

What do people catch themselves doing in these simulations? Have you ever watched yourself estimating what you know you do not really understand? Have you ever noticed yourself thinking that THIS customer's requirements won't be riddled with inconsistencies? Have you ever observed yourself creating a budget based upon your sixth sense of what the client will agree to pay?

I have created plans out of the thinnest air and encouraged my client to gauge my progress against them. I've set expectations and disappointed them. I've proven myself foolish more times than I can remember. I'm getting better at catching myself doing these disabling things. Mastery for me is not about simply avoiding these situations, but about getting better at recovering from my discoveries.

Workshop simulations help people discover how they unconsciously tangle themselves in their projects. Our purpose is not to humiliate or to show the error of their ways - or even to show them what to do instead. Our purpose is to highlight the choices that only they can offer themselves. Becoming more aware creates opportunities for choosing something else. This often seems like learning how to stop creating your own chains. Discovering that you've been creating your own chains usually feels distressing.

We offer each participant a taste of their own authority so they can discover not only that they author their own experience, but that they are also their own rewrite editors. Why? Because rewriting is where real mastery occurs.

Rewriting Your Experiences

If this unconscious engagement is a natural human tendency, doing something different should feel inhuman, and it does! I'm always amused when process improvement practitioners attend the Mastering Projects Workshop. They usually catch themselves leading some anarchistic charge, forgetting their years of training and practice in the face of some overwhelming uncertainty. Their primordial instincts take over when the cannon balls start flying.
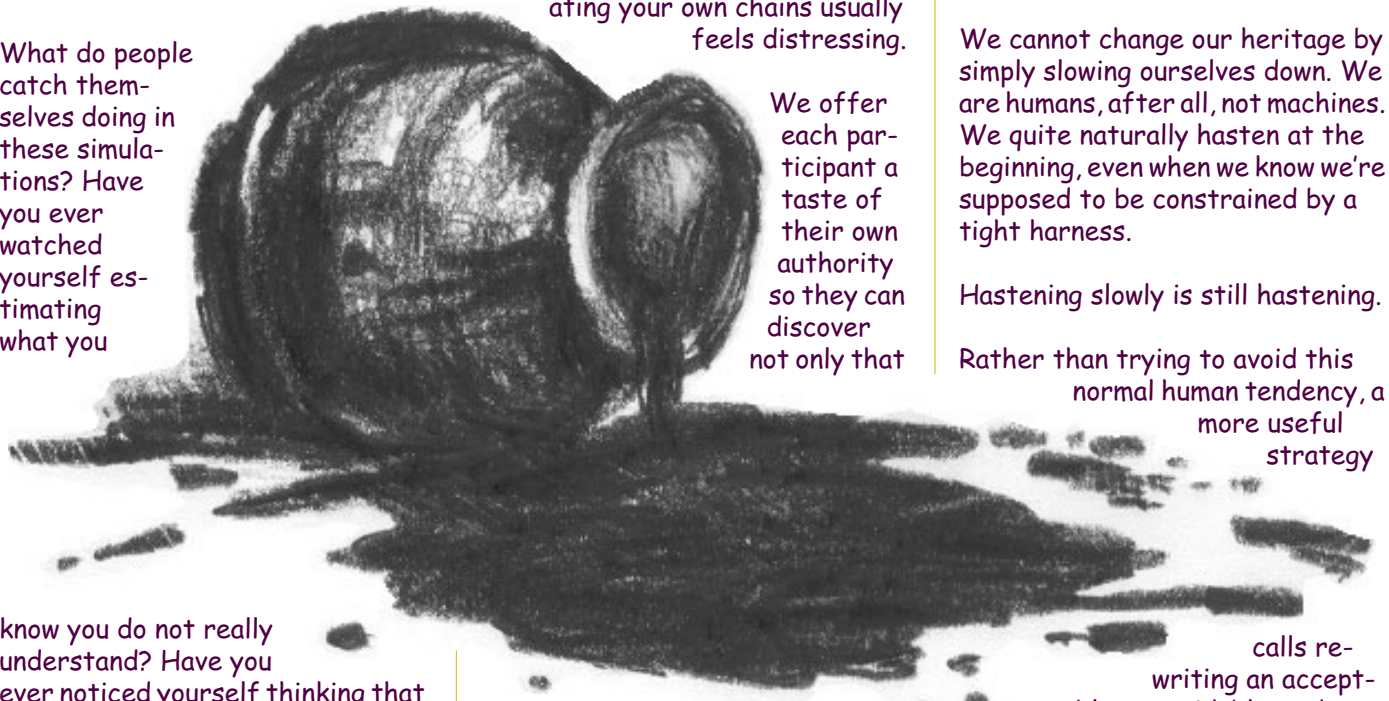
Instinct might lead us to inadequate solutions, but not to necessarily unrecoverable ones. First solutions rarely hold together for long. Many second solutions quickly crumble, too. Strategies meant to insure a long-lived first outcome just prolong the resolving. They deserve names like "analysis paralysis."

We cannot change our heritage by simply slowing ourselves down. We are humans, after all, not machines. We quite naturally hasten at the beginning, even when we know we're supposed to be constrained by a tight harness.

Hastening slowly is still hastening.

Rather than trying to avoid this normal human tendency, a more useful strategy calls rewriting an acceptable, unavoidable, and even an essential part of every project's process. The real point is probably not to get it right the first time, but to get the wrongness in (and back out again) as adeptly as possible.

One Mastering Projects Workshop simulation directs the class to agree on the answer to a simple math problem. One group took more than forty minutes to present the correct answer that another group found in less than a minute. What caused this difference? The forty minute group concluded that answering the question correctly the first time was the objective. To achieve this end, they engaged in an intricate dance, intending to reach agreement on the right answer without anyone having to reveal any wrong ones. Watching this process was excruciating! It felt, literally, inhuman.

The under-a-minute group first agreed to accept any answer their leader posed. The leader's first seven answers were wrong. He presented all eight answers in less than a minute. This group succeeded by quickly uncovering their errors. Unlike the folks that got the right answer on their first try, this team shared an exhilarating experience!

Writing works this way, too. Gail Sher's wonderful book, One Continuous Mistake, ISBN: 0140195874, praises this process by which real writers produce. Sher notes that no successful writer ever learns how to make deathless prose flow out of the end of their pen. What first shows up on even an experienced writer's page most often turns out to be a mistake. Real writers employ a process that feels, in Sher's words, like one continuous mistake.

This sounds like project work! In both writing and project work, we create what has never existed before. To achieve this, we employ well-known techniques in unique contexts. We invariably discover better paths or better destinations along the way. Given these similarities, shouldn't we recognize that doing great project work requires the writer's messy process? Great project work should create a personal experience that feels like you're making one continuous mistake. Otherwise, you're probably unconscious.

Weed It And Reap!

I've learned to forgive and forget my earlier versions when editing my writing. I'm not always so forgiving or forgetful about my project work. Are you? No one can gauge progress by either the corrections made or the corrections avoided. I cannot know until the end how delightfully I will have resolved my mostly self-inflicted dilemmas. I must become aware of the dilemmas before I can resolve them. Once aware, I must accept authority over them. None of this work feels very comfortable. Once I'm aware, I'm continually challenged to stay engaged through the mess. Mastery shuns those who sleep through these opportunities.

The disappointments inherent in this process can overwhelm me and destroy my ability to work through this continuous-seeming disorder. Weeding can't destroy the quality of gardening for those who love to weed, but I seemed to have learned somewhere that weeding isn't gardening. Still, gardening cannot be all harvesting the fruits of my labor. Gardening, like writing and like project work, includes unavoidable weeding. I'm discovering that if I cannot tolerate weeding, I probably have no business calling myself a gardener.

"...if I cannot tolerate weeding, I probably have no business calling myself a gardener."

With this insight, I can chuckle to myself as I catch myself engaging unconsciously. I'm laughing at the joy I derive from feeling this wind blow through my hair. I know my pleasure will erode as I discover the poverty of my first invigorating solution. I expect to get frustrated as I struggle with reworking what so recently seemed so perfect. Then, out of this tangle, if I can maintain the faith that I will discover something even more powerful than I'd originally imagined, I almost always do.

Mastering projects means making peace with this peg-legged process. Many carry this messy understanding away from the workshop. Their real world projects work better afterwards because they stop expecting them to work perfectly. They engage ready to embrace a raft of mistakes in pursuit of genuinely delightful results. das
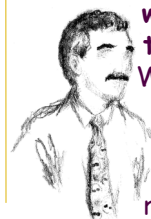
David's Notes

See What's New on our web site: **www.projectcommunity.com/whatsnew.html**! We've moved!
We're plotting some interesting futures! We have some books to recommend! das

Notices:

If your projects feel too messy, consider enrolling!

For **True North pgs' Mastering Projects Workshop Open Enrollment Schedule**, see our web site- **www.projectcommunity.com** for online registration and the most current schedules!

Also, check our Heretics' Forum:

http://pc.wiki.net

Consider, too enrolling in **Problem Solving Leadership** workshop. See **http://www.geraldmweinberg.com** for details. das

About *Compass*

Compass is published periodically by *True North pgs, Inc.*, and is distributed free of charge to a project-oriented community.

Compass is a navigation tool for continuing your process of improving your project experience. *Compass* shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective leadership to yourself and to your project's community. We enable each other to improve the quality of our project experiences through sharing our stories and our insights.

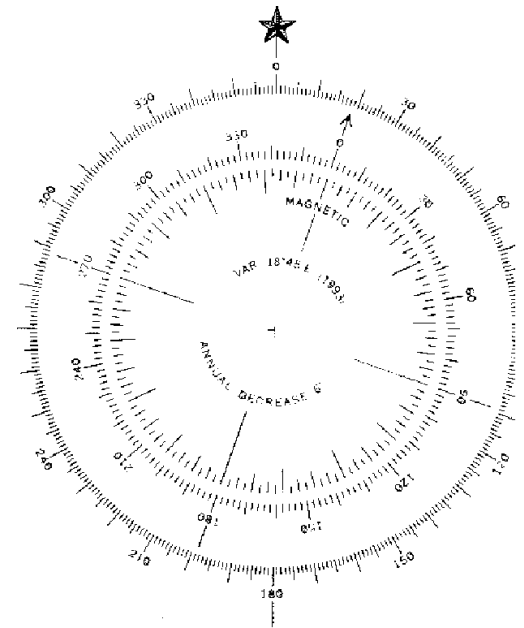*David A. Schmaltz, President*
True **N**orth pgs, Inc.
P. O. Box 1532 Walla Walla, WA 99362
(509) 527-9773
TN@ix.netcom.com
www.projectcommunity.com

"You are
the most powerful
project management tool
you will ever use."

www.projectcommunity.com

True North pgs, Inc.
P. O. Box 1532
Walla Walla, WA 99362