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**FROM REPORTING TO RECOUNTING
IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

by

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Overview

At DIFER, a consultancy of about ten people, we are interested in the connection between theories of narratives or accounts, and business life from three angles : the practices of intervention, the development of these connections and the methodological tools used. We work on the creation of narratives of subjects concerned with the running of projects, its strategy, the exchange of knowledge and benchmarking, listening to clients' needs, as well as personal accompaniment. We carry out assignments both for large companies (such as Eléctricité de France, France Télécom, Association Nationale Pour l'Emploi (equivalent of the Job Centre)) as well as for small and medium-sized enterprises. In this talk, I am going to concentrate on the formulation of narratives associated with the running of projects : for all those who wish to go into the subject in greater depth, I refer them to the work of Dominique Christian, the head of DIFER.

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Narratives in order to manage projects

Work on project management, as well as the experiences of the people concerned, brings to the fore the strength of projects. I present the hypothesis that this strength lies in the fact that a project can be made into a story.

Every project is a story

Creating stories from projects happens almost automatically, spontaneously. As long as a project is not finished, it remains purely a story ; a story of what has already happened and of what is about to happen. Once the project is over, what is left is the end result, more or less in keeping with the original plans, and the stories which circulate about the project. The networks of relationships borne out of these projects are linked to the feeling of having taken part in such an intense story that one can talk of «stories of brothers-in-arms». A project is, therefore, on the one hand, «a structuring process which shapes a future reality which, for the time being, has no exact equivalent»¹ and, on the other hand, the creation of a story of this structuring process.

One of the important functions of stories is to give some sense to the current circumstances, thanks to the timing of events and their layout, in other words, the organisation of events beyond mere chronology. Telling the story of something is to keep it at a distance and therefore being able to work on it, in the same way as in the technical world whereby the creation of a scale model allows one to stand back and rework the project. In that respect, creating stories around projects seems like a simple management tool.

How to spot a badly structured project

First of all, one can claim that someone who is capable of recounting or narrating his actions finds sense in them. By contrast, if a project member is incapable of recounting the project or his contribution to the project, then this is symptomatic of problems. One can therefore ask project managers to recount the project to see if the project makes sense and to tick off the potential symptoms of malfunctioning. Our intuitive ability to understand stories means that a narrative of a project which rings false is an empirical sign that something is not right in the project. We can then try to discover what it is which rings false and why. Unfortunately, the opposite is not true ; a good story-teller is capable of telling a fabulous story which nevertheless corresponds to a disastrous project !

Stories all along the way

At the outset of projects, it is useful to share stories from the different parties concerned to a greater or lesser extent, in order to confront the anticipation and expectations of each person with regards the project. Putting the project into narrative form is a good means of seeing to what extent these expectations come together.

While the project is under way, the same exercise allows us to chart the progress of the performances and to check once more the level of agreement between the actors. When there are new arrivals in a project, meetings which are more or less formal, are organised in order to talk about the project : what is the origin ? Where are we ? Where are we going to ? Telling

¹ AFITEP (1991), *Le management de projet. Principes et pratiques*, Afnor, Paris, p. 2.

the story enables the communication of messages and of ethics which are awaited and expected by the audience. In large-scale projects, such as the Olympic Games, where one has to integrate large numbers of volunteers very quickly, this way of working is very efficient.

In the end, the exchange of narratives based around a project is a means of assessment, of turning the page, and of building up a network.

In the same vein as Ikujiro Nonaka², authors who write about the circulation of knowledge and in particular tacit learning in business, emphasise the importance of the creation of narratives and the exchange of stories. In clubs where work methods are exchanged, we suggest to project managers to recount stories concerning project managers to other project managers. Shared experiences in context allow one to go beyond the mere check lists of elements in project management. Jerome Bruner, an American psychologist, emphasises the major importance of memorising stories in the composition of experiences³.

It is, therefore, in management's interest to explain the project regularly in order to take stock of one's progress, to keep a distance from the project, and to adjust oneself accordingly. This interest is even more important when most of the time, the project manager is not in direct control and does not have the levers to activate all the participants in the project. In general, the different groups taking part are more or less distant, more or less involved, and more or less concerned with regards the project. From then on, it is interesting to exchange stories from the different groups in order to know what place the project occupies for each person, what meaning they give to it, etc.

The story and the meaning of a project

Let us now look at the work carried out on the organisation of projects which puts forward several models : from models of project managers / contractors, models of project management, etc., to work of authors who are interested in stories.

The structure of the stories

Greimas, who set out to expose the unchanging parts of stories, suggests a model describing the distribution of functions in a story. A story consists firstly of a sender, the one who makes the story happen. He gives his mission to the hero. During the story the beneficiary will receive an object thanks to a hero who relies on helpers but who is also impeded in his action by opponents. In practice, it is much more complex that this as several stories are embedded, one on the other.

This narrative framework can, however, be used to read through a project and to see how the various roles are joined. One can apply this framework with regards the project manager and also each actor, so that the narratives become interwoven.

In the work of Christophe Midler, the art of influence emerges as a key factor in the management of a project, since the project manager is not always directly in charge of the participants. Using Greimas' model, one can see that the art of influence is capable of

² Ikujiro Nonaka, *A Dynamic Theory of Knowledge creation*, Organization Science, 1994, vol. 5, p. 4-37.

³ Jérôme Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1990.

weaving elaborate stories, in other words, of making sure that the project is represented in each individual's story.

The opponents of the project

In Greimas' model, one should pay attention to the role of the opponent. Every project has its opponents. When there are no opponents to a project, despite investigating all possibilities, one can deduce that it is a 'false' project or a real delusion ! One launches a project in order to accomplish something which normal organisational routines are not capable of doing or are not able to do in the best circumstances (quality, cost, timing). From then on, the project is bound to upset the balance and will naturally generate opposition.

In stories, the opponents have a specific role. In fact, a good story shows how an opposition pair, who at the outset seem irreconcilable, can be resolved. The meeting between a king and a shepherdess is a good example, since everything is against them, and despite it all, this opposition will be overcome. In organisations, the opposition pair will be resolved thanks to the opponent, which often is not human, such as competition, momentum in the company, etc. Making a narrative out of the project, by identifying the opponents, also adds to our understanding of it.

In a factory emitting pollution, a project manager had the task of developing a technology which created less pollution and was less costly, so that the infrastructure could be re-established in the city centre. At the start of the project, the cost of the standard technology was ten times less expensive than the non-polluting technology, in other words, the latter was economically untenable. Half-way through the project, the project manager, sheepishly announced to the board of directors that the project was a long way behind schedule. Some directors were sorry about delay but others came to see him at the end to say : "You're unquestionably late. What great strategy !" Not all the directors were in agreement about the story of the project. Some judged it of great importance because they anticipated a real problem in finding new sites because of the pollution generated. For others, there was no question of being able to develop new technologies which would cost less than three times more expensive than those existing. If only one could prove the technological feasibility of these new installations, then these new norms would be put into force everywhere ! The objective of the project became to reassure oneself that the project was incapable of succeeding. One had to put as much effort into it as possible, but still fail. In the two narratives, the opponent is not at all the same, reflecting the two different meanings of the project...Making a narrative out of the project allows one to highlight the divergence of meaning as well as the opposition pair which the project manager has to reconcile.

Finally, all the participants in a project are confronted with different levels of the story and they play up to it⁴. At the first level, there is the external story, in other words, the «impartial» chronicle of events, the one which one finds in the schedules and the reports. The second level is made up of the published story ; what the project participants make public in brochures and other communication documents. The third level is the personal story of the project which consists of everything which happens but which is not made known to the public, just like the personal experiences of the actors concerned. Finally, the fourth level is the *story-o-type*⁵, in

⁴ Dominique Christian, *Compter, raconter ? La stratégie du récit*. Maxima, 1999.

⁵ W.-L. Randall, *The Story We Are : An Essay on Self Creation*, 1997.

other words, the story which people outside the project tell about it and which influences its progress.

In the running of the project, it is crucial for the different levels of the stories to join up, but, at the same time, it is essential to discern these levels in order to determine the events which make up the rhythm of the project and those which one can make public, in order to keep a handle on the stories which circulate about the project, etc.

The creation of a narrative is not an afterthought or a fringe activity, it is the heart of the project.

Structures existing alongside projects and stories

According to Florence Charue and Christophe Midler⁶ (1994), a project is structured into six major components :

- a overall goal to achieve ;
- within a particular context ;
- with a multidisciplinary character reflecting the many actors of differing skills ;
- in an atmosphere of uncertainty ;
- according to a strongly irreversible dynamic which is delimited by the beginning and the end of the project ;
- and which forms an open system, sensitive to outside influences.

A good story is composed of :

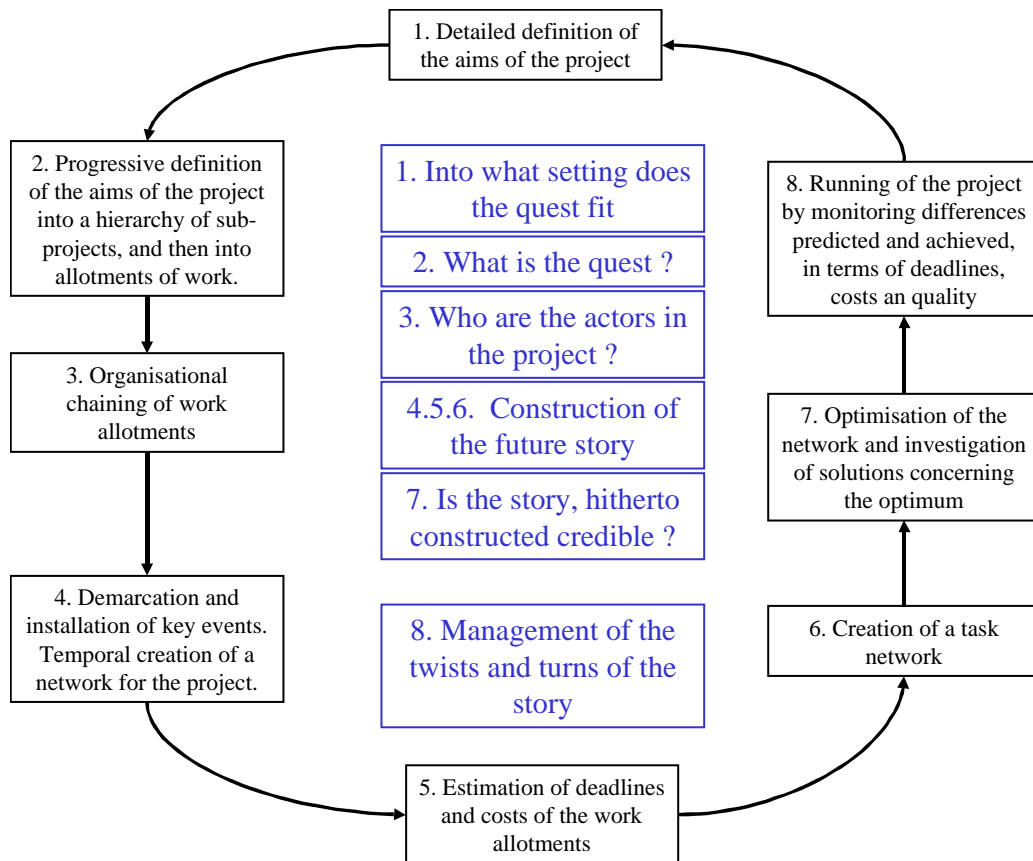
- an intrigue, a quest ;
- a setting ;
- characters ;
- a suspense and twists and turns ;
- separate episodes ;
- all put to the scrutiny of the public.

This parallel structure reveals strong similarities between the components of a project and those of a story. It is perhaps this which explains the motivation which projects generate, to the extent that the actors in the project often balk at the idea of reverting to standard work. The project arouses even more interest since the participants live out a comprehensive professional story whose beginning and end they know, and in the course of which, they can make their mark, unless the management of human resources dictates that certain people have to leave a project in progress. It is not very often that in the professional world one can be part of a story. This also shows that management, which systematically resorts to projects, runs the risk of making projects commonplace and thereby losing their incentive effect.

Similarity in structure also enables a narrative reading of the series of project management. The traditional course of a project described by Christian Navarre⁷ can be compared with the structure of a story, as the following diagram shows.

⁶ Florence Charue, Christophe Midler, *Le développement du management de projet chez Rhône-Poulenc*, rapport de recherche, CRG de l'École polytechnique, juin, 1994.

⁷ Christian Navarre, *Pilotage stratégique de la firme et gestion des projets : de Ford à Taylor à AGILE et IMS*, ECOSIP, *Pilotages de projet et entreprises, diversités et convergences*, Economica, 1983, pp. 183-214.



In the same way, a project is an historical process which can be viewed differently in light of this idea of narrative. For example, the work of Vladimir Propp and his followers on the structure of episodes brought the unchanging aspects to the fore. Typically, a narrative begins with a situation where the balance has been upset. In order to restore the balance, the hero has to leave ordinary, every-day life, prepare himself for a qualifying ordeal, win a confrontation, then take a certifying test, which allows him to authenticate his heroic character, following which there is a reward.

The parallels with project management draw their inspiration from the work of March, who discerns two main practices in organisations : exploitation and exploration. Projects find themselves in both camps. The typical process begins in the exploitation camp, with the identification of a need or a problem (the disruptive factor), followed by a feasibility study (the qualifying ordeal). Then one gets involved in the exploration side of things, by means of a conception and creation phase (confrontation), followed by a certification stage which corresponds to the adoption of the innovation by the users. The process ends with the conclusion (the prize-giving) which explains to what extent the expectations were satisfied.

This model of understanding the project does not have any predictive value : how many worthy actions had no after-effects ? How many innovators did not receive the merit they deserved ? But if it is used in the retrospective way, it enables one to foresee the coming ordeals and to determine the criteria according to which the project will be evaluated at each stage.

DISCUSSION

Interventions in practice

Question : *In practice, how do your interventions take place ? I understand that Dominique Christian brings along a big computer equipped with a mysterious software which helps people build stories...*

Thierry Boudès : There is indeed a mysterious computer and specific tools suited to the type of intervention. As far as the projects are concerned, our software takes into account the fundamentals of the running of the project borne out of management theories and the theories related to the story. The tool enables a team to work on creating a narrative of the project by following a structured path (setting, actors, etc.). Coupled to a voting system, it enables the construction of an «average story». All the same, everyone is asked to write down where his story diverges with the group story. Next, we work with these people both on the common story and on all the discrepancies with the different individual representations. This sort of intervention is not enough in itself, but is part of a study (for example, a mission of allowing others to profit from one's savoir-faire, *capitalisation*) which starts upstream and ends downstream. We also carry out missions on strategy in order to check the clarity of the defined direction.

Q. : *And management boards accept the idea that these people are always telling stories ?*

T. B. : In certain companies, like 3M,⁸ the *business plan* has to be accompanied by a narrative describing how to achieve the objectives.

We also work with these companies on their client's needs. You have to work from the client's standpoint, to make them tell you about their commercial process, to grasp the place of the company in their story, etc.

From story to reality

Q. : *You work on stories, with words, like the psychoanalyst who has only got his patient's words as material. There are two other sorts of representations of a project which are not narratives : firstly, drawings and scale models, and secondly, dreams and myths. The individual dream or the collective myth are not stories at the beginning. Generally, I use four levels in representing management problems : the material, the people, the institutions and the sacred. Narratives have a place in this model inasmuch as they make up the current between the people and the institutions, as your talk emphasised, but also between model and dream. A project can only exist if there is a to-and-fro between a dream and a model ; a dream only becomes reality if one builds a model but a model can only be constructed if one dreams about it. The transition from the model to the dream, and vice versa, occurs by constantly calling upon the dreamlike or mythical enthusiasm of the actors for a tangible subject which the project will embody by the end of the process. This is the function of narratives. From then on, a grammar specific to narratives, which would clarify what a story can tell or not and what it is forced to tell, would be a considerable key in knowing which dreams can become reality. A dream which cannot be shared, will never become reality.*

⁸ Shaw Gordon, Brown Robert, Bromiley, Philip, Strategic stories : *How 3M is rewriting business planning*, Harvard Business Review, Mai-Juin, 1998.

T. B. : What is the link between a story and a reality ? The trend of business culture presupposes that stories, sagas and other myths which circulate in an organisation are the materials by which one can obtain a reality, which is distinct and pre-existing. I think that this connection is not as simple as that. When I talk about a project, for you it's just a story, for me it's a reality.

Capitalisation thanks to narrative

Q. : *The organisers of the Winter Olympics at Albertville were faced with the formidable problem of increasing the size of the team from ten people to seven thousand in the space of a year-and-a-half. How do you organise training as and when the numbers increase ? The solution, which consisted of asking «old» members to explain the project to the new-comers, was very efficient and more attractive than any session of academic training. In addition, I am astounded by the insufficient use of stories of actors in a project in order to capitalise on or profit from strategic knowledge for a company. I tried in vain to put in place this sort of operation when I was an administrator for a foreign aid company where the missions lasted from three months to two years and where individual experiences could have helped enrich common knowledge and understanding. Have we made any progress since then ?*

T. B. : I am involved in an system of exchange of management practices between project managers, where we set out to create conditions conducive to narratives. Apart from the unofficial context of interaction around the coffee machine, it is not easy to give an account of one's project. First of all, it doesn't seem serious in an official setting, so you need to reassure the audience. Secondly, telling a story places the interaction on an unusual level. On the one hand, the story-teller is not entirely master of what he is conveying. On the other hand, tackling a project from the angle of a narrative brings to light what is at stake and the scale involved - for example, the fact that two people see a project very differently - elements which do not appear in the accounts under any other form such as reporting. One of the benefits which people get out of these meetings is in fact to realise that they are not the only ones to come across certain problems.

Narratives and manipulation

Michel Berry : *Michel Villette commented on an article which Thierry Boudès and Dominique Christian submitted to the journal Gérer et Comprendre. I quote an extract : « It seems to me that the authors identify dangerously common sense, truth, efficiency and the manager's point of view. They postulate that the manager is always right, on the understanding that the project manager should also, in order to succeed, listen to the account of others and adjust his own account so as to enlist all the actors whom he needs and give them an active function in the story that he is constructing, so as to provide an efficient contribution. This all comes within an essentially ballistic conception of communication in a company. (...) When literary analysis becomes transformed into techniques of propaganda, this never does any good, in any case, it isn't literary analysis any more. Why not re-read Jean-Pierre Faye's 'Théorie du récit' (Theory of accounts) where you can see that some accounts, which went a little too far, sparked off some of the biggest human catastrophes of the twentieth century. Among ancient exotic peoples, the dual roles held by one person, of chief and poet, was rarely tolerated. Totalitarianism is born precisely when leaders also have control of the creation of the accounts of their own exploits. Beware the ghost of Louis Renault ! ».*

T. B. : First of all, I appreciate that Michel Villette recognises that the system produces effects and therefore has a certain efficiency, since he mentions the possibility of manipulation. Every model of human science can be diverted from its original aim to manipulative ends. From the moment that they are used with a view to produce effects, one can cry manipulation... In the end, this comment postulates that the mere fact of recounting, places the story-teller in a position of force, which is not necessarily the case. The story-teller is not the master of the game, since, on one hand, he is acting and he lays himself open, and, on the other hand, the person who is listening plays an active part and adds his own interpretations which the speaker cannot anticipate. The other is not just a mere object.

Q. : *In your interventions, are the opponents present ?*

T. B. : One of our principles of intervention is to be wary of the so-called «good pupil» effect. Take the example of a client who asked for our help in the context of a project of changes which were going to affect the areas of activity of a number of people in the company. He suggested creating a pilot seminar so that the people could discuss the question without immediately calling upon the tens of people concerned. Generally speaking, in the «prototype» everything works well because only the ‘good pupils’, in whose interest it is to change, are called upon. From that moment on, the pilot seminar is no longer representative of the process at the company scale. We set out to have some bad pupils. When there was an intervention in an historical context which, on the face of it, was very negative, we had to push them, so that there were some opponents to the reform, which in itself presupposed that these opponents would agree to co-operate. By starting to work on past stories, the participants discovered themselves that their individual judgements concerning the past were less black-and-white than expected. The opponents who were surprised by this picture, which was less black than had been painted, entered into the discussion.

Q. : *I am struck that we often talk about the creation of a story, in the singular. Your idea is to converge towards a unique story or account by means of a vote, but this is a bid for power. Furthermore, in companies, the order of the qualifying, principal and certifying tests is not respected. One often begins with the idea/design, in other words, the principal ordeal, then the certifying test, and only then does one finally discover the needs. If the aim of the intervention is to put the stages back into the order of the story, then this would be a second bid for power. By means of this process, I think that we obtain a product which can be useful during the process but which is not worth much in terms of capitalisation after the event. As much as I believe in the importance of stories to make the actors think about what they are doing, I nevertheless remain sceptical about the fact that one can use the story – the end product – in a way completely detached from the actors who created it.*

T. B. : In projects, a moment arrives when things should come together, even if parallel stories remain. Voting forces people to choose between stories. Often the participants do not want to choose, arguing that all the stories are on the same level. But if the little picture enables us to see the bigger picture, as is almost always the case when one is confronted with large volumes of information, then nothing is legible any more. We work towards a common story but we reveal what is behind the scenes ; it’s not about gathering up all the stories and then making a *résumé*, but simply producing a satisfactory model, in other words, an object which facilitates group discussion. The model is made by the group, not merely one spokesperson. The participants are asked to write down their points of disagreement which can be discussed after the common story has been constructed ; we personally do not intervene in the meaning of the story. This story does not necessarily respect the standard

structure but it is interesting to keep this structure in mind in order to analyse the differences. It is true that the unique «dry» story is less rich, in terms of the transfer of savoir-faire, than the complete data base. What remains is that one can work on the learning narratives by asking the actors to reproduce the way in which they proceeded in order to develop such and such a skill or strategic innovation for the company. This is perhaps one way of working on the transfer of knowledge.

Q. : *I am well aware of the difference between the intentional creation of a story and the spontaneous expression of a personal experience. As far as journalists are concerned, stories are part of their professional vocabulary. In the United States, the word 'story' is used for an article in a newspaper. The journalist chooses the facts which seem to him to be «story material» in order to keep the reader interested and emotionally involved. He chooses events which have a strong social issue and treats them in a personal way by introducing a hero, an opponent, goodies and baddies, etc. He does not invent anything, but the deliberate composition of the facts in order to provoke the reader's interest, has parallels with your process of story creation. We're in the world of communication. The spontaneous account of past facts seems to me to be as interesting for management as are constructed stories. The speaker is not in the domain of the story but in a freer expression of a real-life experience. The aim is therefore to understand more in order to work better in projects. But putting into words what one experiences is not topical in companies.*

T. B. : I was recently with a client who wanted to carry out prospective work with his managing board, but he abandoned it for fear of censorship. He feared that it would brush aside the key questions. I believe that if management is incapable of talking to one another on a prospective project, then that says a lot.

The importance of the past

Q. : *The story which exists by the end of the project seems as important to me as the stories which emerge during the course of the project, since mythical stories in organisations weigh very heavily on their future. It was thus shown in a previous session of the École de Paris⁹ that the success or failure of car manufacturing companies is still today very much linked to the personalities of their founders. The story of their life and of their acts has engendered in each of these establishments a particular culture denoting what one knows and can do and what one cannot do.*

Q. : *One of the problems is that often stories predate the project. For example, stories of people in tough inner city housing estates always mention a murder and serious and painful circumstances. In the light of your talk, I interpret these stories as presenting an opposition to the project that I might want to carry out. I also knew of a company whose diversification strategy had failed to such a point that the survival of the firm was threatened. The new president felt paralysed to launch any sort of diversification strategy, such was the weight of past stories.*

T. B. : That's right ; an American author said « *stories stick like glue* », which conveys very well the permanence of stories. In the context which you mention, it is pointless to try to forget stories ; you have to work on them with people. In our approach, we always take them

⁹ Pierre Beuzit, *La recherche au cœur de la stratégie de la firme*, séminaire Ressources technologiques et innovation, octobre 1999.

into account ; if we fail to, then the people concerned feel an attack to their identity linked to this denial of the past. Moreover, everyone conjures up his own idea of the end of the story by drawing inspiration from the past. The mass of stories in a company functions like a precedent in a legal system.

Q. : *In my experience as a consultant, I use stories in order to keep something at a distance. However, between the story and the action, you can't take the plunge automatically.*

T. B. : In our interventions, work carried out on stories is not independent, but is part of a particular context of action. For example, in work on capitalisation, we work upstream with each person in order to prepare his account and to create the conditions suitable for a useful exchange. A question which we are often asked is : « *what are the results of this work in terms of action ?* » In many cases, the answer is not easy, since the actors do not easily explain how they take advantage of the stories of others. Explaining how to use other people's experiences, is exposing one's own weaknesses.

Good and bad stories

Q. : *What do you mean when you say «the story rings false» ? As far as I am concerned, I distinguish two types of story : one which one tells at the end of the process and which is judged on its truthfulness, in other words, its conformity to what really took place, and the other one which one tells at the beginning, judged, on the contrary, by the yardstick of the fabulous images which it portrays. For example, in a previous session of the École de Paris entitled Le redressement des mines de Jerada (The recovery of the Jerada mines), the speaker chose the slogan «it's impossible, so we're bound to succeed !». In another session, the CEO of Sulzer reported how he assembled the personnel, at a time when the company was in difficulty, in order to tell a story, namely that of the future success of their company. Not all these fabulous stories are the same. Bruno Bettelheim, in his analysis of fairy stories, distinguishes between good and bad stories. The villain illustrates the bad stories in which a miracle happens – the meeting of the swans which redeems the ugly duckling - over which the actor has no hold. In a good story, the message is that even if the hero is helpless, his courage and his ingenuity will enable him to be recognised for his merit. Transposed onto management, a good story can transform a group in difficulty, into a community which has a wonderful objective and whose story tells how it will pull through. Seen in this light, the commitment of employees in a company comes close to the same phenomenon as enthusiasm for role-play.*

T. B. : There is work which shows that when an event is successful, the actors tend to take the credit but when it fails, the causes are external... Isn't this just a means of determining after the event which are the good and the bad stories ? When I mention cock and bull stories, I'm talking about structures and stories which we don't understand and we can hypothesise that others don't understand them either. We try out the stories ourselves in order to see how we would react in our own settings. In so doing, we are not the judge who decides if this rings true or false ; we work on an equal footing with the actors. In addition, efficient stories such as «it's impossible, so we are bound to succeed» incite the opposition pair straight away to go further and encourage support because we sense that something important is going to happen. And the self-realising prophecies play a role ; the way in which we imagine the end of the story influences this end.

The project's story is the manager's story !

Q. : *In districts and suburbs of France, there are many project managers whose mission is to recreate social ties. At the beginning of the 1980s, in response to the problems of the integration of women into local community life, certain people had the idea of creating launderettes. They postulated that women went to meet up in these imitation wash-houses. The problem is, on the one hand, that the machine washes all by itself and that meetings between people undoubtedly emerge from shared acts and energy spent in common and that, on the other hand, the aspiration of these women was certainly to have their own washing machine and not to go to meet up at the launderette. In other words, the project manager sometimes confuses his own personal story and that of the project.*

T. B. : I don't know of any projects where the story of the project manager and the story of the project are not mixed up ! In a number of cases, project managers have in mind the notion of employability and throw themselves into a project with the intention of developing one or another skill and the prospect of changing the company by the end of the project. It is possible that this identification leads to negative effects but it is also the basis of the commitment. In any case, it seems difficult to me to avoid this identification.

Stories of crisis

Q. : *Do you use this approach in crisis situations and, if so, how do you create a climate which favours the recounting of stories ?*

T. B. : We intervened in a small to medium-sized German company which wanted to go into partnership with us. We suggested that they try out our approach with their management board. The creation of a converging story uncovered the fact that the company wanted to get rid of 30 % of its management board ! The participants were capable of explaining this story of rupture. The narrative process is powerful, the actors generally want to go all the way, in the knowledge that the procedure is clearly explained.

From reporting to recounting

Q. : *Is there a way of replacing reporting, which consists of answering to an impatient and mistrustful boss, with «recounting» which would enable one to judge the events other than by the criteria of conventional results and to highlight other talents ?*

T. B. : As far as important decisions in companies are concerned, many stories are passed around via the grapevine and complete formal presentations of tables of figures.

Q. : *The stock market success of Amazon, which is worth fifty times its losses, can be explained by recounting stories about the future of the Internet since, as far as financial reporting is concerned, it's a disaster !*

Attempt at a résumé

Q. : *I propose a résumé of this talk. A speaker declared that the build-up of know-how about projects is a result of recounting stories but that this exercise is so difficult that even by allowing people time, it does not necessarily succeed. As far as I am concerned, I know of several successful examples of capitalisation, but I do not know any which have been used. I*

also go back to the objection of another speaker who argued that stories are all about speeches whereas projects are about action. It seems to me that the story of a project, which has already been finished, is not made the most of in other projects because of the particularities of each project. I suggest that a story constitutes one of the terms of creation of a prior agreement in the different phases of the action, a sort of debating stand. I totally disagree with Michel Villette who maintains that the manager's point of view wins out in a discussion ; he may be defeated or may change his mind. Finally, the story 'after the event' is of very little relevance ; it is a sort of «bad story» which explains after the event why something worked, whereas the story during the course of the project enables one to direct the course of action and constitutes a good story.

T. B. : In general, conventional capitalisation results in check lists of potential difficulties. Capitalisation (or, the transfer of savoir-faire), by means of stories, does not only take into account problems which are encountered, but also reproduces bypass strategies used by the actors. One of the limits is that some people who do not want to show their weaknesses, do not reveal all the facets of their efficiency.

The speaker :

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