

Personal liking defines the content of planning

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Let's start with a heretical, or following today's vocabulary, a politically incorrect statement. It does by no means doubt the "good" intentions of the actors but it questions the reality of their behaviour:

Planning is an awkward form of making believe that the decisions based on emotional or ideological reasons are rational and objective.

Using the disguise of a planning process we try to make believe that our decisions are scientifically sound, serious and well considered. We try as well to describe our activities as neutrally as possible and to do as if they were disconnected from our preferences and inclinations, as if we acted completely unselfish. However, and in fact, it is the own interest that defines to a major part the future orientation of any planning. The own interest in this form is pretty difficult to prove and should not be confounded with corruption. The term corruption has a bad reputation since it involves money or other material goods. The own interest as it intervenes in planning activities consists mainly in furthering the own well-being.

While making believe that our activities are in the first place oriented at a given objective we use the planning, as far as possible, to combine credibly the useful with the pleasant/agreeable. Very often as a facilitator I am aware of this hypocrisy and sometimes it bothers me (especially when my interests are not involved), but you cannot avoid it, as long as the personal and

sometimes unconscious hidden agendas aren't put in the open. I admit, we are fighting here windmills like Don Quixote, but to me it seems useful to point again and again at the fact that planning has very little to do with objectivity although the objectives are justified with plenty of rational arguments.

During the whole process of planning all participants try to integrate their interests as well as possible in the future activities. Good arguments to justify the intervention are never lacking and even if our arguments are not taken up and the planning happens to go against our own interests there are plenty of possibilities to adjust the course of actions later on.

Would you like to have an example: In many evaluations and consultations it has been suggested to visit the project area during the rainy season or the hottest time of the year. Of course it is a valuable argument since project managers should be acquainted how the partners live even in the above mentioned difficult times of the year. Everybody agrees with this fact but nobody thinks that this insight will ever change the usual travelling calendar avoiding heat and rain. The envisaged well-being is way to mighty and every traveller will find very catchy justifications for choosing a more agreeable time for his/her next visit to the field.

Some time ago, Ruedi Högger wrote about the exact and the mighty in project work. In his article he mentioned specifically the planning in an intercultural context. He describes the difficulties in finding a common goal when the other partners don't admit openly their motives, their hidden agendas. So, one could consider a planning session to be a social game where every player is bound to cleverly introduce his/her own interests without being discovered by the other players.

¹ Hereafter I am writing about "us" since I suppose that other people did have a similar experience. All those who are not familiar with the described attitudes may change the "us" to "they" or "the others", so as the text may suit them as well and be it only to stay informed.

The game gets even more complicated when an unmasked player tries to save his interest by allowing or even defending that another player may place his or her interest.

In intercultural relationships the motives are even more mysterious and unforeseeable. I should say it does less depend on cultural differences than on the sincerity and honesty between the planning partners. Neither do I find a difference in the tactics of camouflage in the various cultures I met. In our own context it is more difficult to pass with the proposed measures. Of course in intercultural meetings we are sometimes surprised by very exotic motives or the unsuspected form of disguise. But even so the fact remains that most motives are not mentioned openly in a homogeneous culture as well.

Going a step further, I'd claim that the mighty, the looking for each planners own well-being is not only valid for planning the goal but as well for the operational planning and the implementation of activities. In most cases, general goals are commonly accepted and easily agreed upon. Later, when it comes to the implementation of activities, when the tasks are getting close then everybody tries to twist and adjust, to turn and squeeze so as to let the uncomfortable pass by.

If by bad luck and in spite of all secret resistance we were not able to avoid the unpleasant activities then there are still a couple of very helpful last resorts, like: to delay, to forget, to dismiss, to postpone, to pass on, to delegate, to miss, to oversee, getting sick or even better to start planning anew.

Again and again we are inventing new methods of planning and we refine the criteria for the evaluation of project work. There must be something fishy about this whole business. Actually we know: if we really want something accomplished then we are able to do it. To my understanding a major part of the many failures in the planning methods is a result that the planners or some of the planners do not want to achieve what they are planning. Either they subliminally don't want to reach the goal or some of the activities necessary to reach the goal are unpleasant or even bothering them.

Now, look back at your planning sessions. Have you ever found a group with such honest relations that even the hidden motives are mentioned? However, if the above mentioned manoeuvres really happen then it would be advisable either to include this factor of incertitude "personal well-being" in the planning process or, on the other hand, find ways that these manoeuvres of camouflage aren't necessary any more.

Let me give you an example of planning taking into account my own interest: One of the projects I had to visit once a year was situated on the Pacific coast. Every year I placed my visit in the summer vacation of our children. It permitted me to leave my family well installed on the beach while I was travelling on to the project site. So far no employer would object to my behaviour. However, the linking of tasks with some other advantage can be increasingly raised. You may plan projects close to an attractive beach or even a specific beach or resort. I am still dreaming of a project on the Maldives islands. Projects within easy driving distance – meaning paved roads – are more often visited than remote ones. To prove the mentioned fact let me quote one of my desk officers after an extremely strenuous trek on horse back through mud and mire: "Couldn't you choose our projects a little closer to the paved road!"

"So what", said one of my colleagues after reading the above text. "Tell us at least how it could be done differently." Well, I think the first step would be to acknowledge that the personal interest for well-being does have a major influence in the planning process. To make it known by everybody involved it would take away part of the strain put on the planners to hide their interest. And besides, being aware of the above mentioned facts may help finding new procedures that take into account the human factor with its very important influence.