Playfully out of the crisis

Project management with an artistic mindset

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For readers in a hurry | The article highlights the potential of artistic sensemaking in project management. Based on the Cynefin framework, which points to appropriate patterns of action in the face of various degrees of uncertainty, it presents parallels in artistic thinking and action and classifies them as strategies for coping with uncertainty. Artists work open to process and results and are able to use chaotic and complex situations creatively with sensitive perception and in dialogue with their material. This makes artistic work a future-oriented and embodied form of sensemaking, whose elements of bifocality, multivalence, ambidextry, improvisation and embodiment can enrich planning-oriented project and crisis management.

Keywords | art, creativity, cynefin, uncertainty, sensemaking, improvisation, embodiment

Clint Eastwood and Kathryn Bigelow always stay on schedule and on budget with their film projects; often they don't even push the envelope. Both work at a high artistic level: Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director top long lists of awards. How do they manage to do that?

Eastwood gets by with a minimum of planning. He usually works without a shooting schedule or storyboard. On location, he makes a preliminary assessment of the setting and then works with what he finds on the day of shooting. He doesn't decide on camera angles and framing until he's on set. His cameraman knows that he has to light the scenery in such a way that all shooting possibilities remain open. Eastwood is very well prepared and rarely rehearses. He works from the moment and usually only needs one or two takes for a scene. About his working style he says: "I come to the set knowing what we need to do and with very clear ideas of what I think will work, but I don't like to walk in and impose on the setting with a lot of preconceptions. I like to see what we've got on that day, what the lighting is like, what's in the environment, what's interesting or can be made to become interesting and then to see where the actors are going to go. ... I like to be open to what I find. ... I like to respond to all that, work with it and bring it into the film." [1, p. 70f.]

Bigelow also relies on her instincts, but works differently than Eastwood. She uses rehearsal work to communicate a clear vision of the film to her crew, and needs elaborate shooting schedules because she shoots all her films on location rather than in the studio, despite ambitious settings. So, when shooting for days at sea, she had multiple dispositions for every single hour of the shooting day. "If you have that level of organization, it enables you to have some freedom and spontaneity," she says [2, p. 124]. "Working on water is an area that even a director can't control. Once you relegate yourself to that, you realize that you've got to be painfully flexible. You've got to be ready to shoot anything. ... That kind of flexibility necessitates the need for improvisation." [2, p. 126] "So there is this planned disorder and orderly chaos that is constantly being balanced while you work." [2, S. 127]

Actor Harrison Ford, who has worked with Bigelow, says of her: "I don't remember ever facing the feeling of chaos. Directors have to be able to think on their feet when the time isn't there, the light isn't there, when the capacity of an actor to perform isn't there - and they have to find a way to make it work anyway. Kathryn never would have survived if she hadn't been able to do that. " [3, 5. para.]

Bigelow lets her films emerge from details and compares this process to the way a painter applies paint to a white canvas. An analogy rooted in Bigelow's biography: before her film career, she studied painting. "In painting, there are no preconceived notions of what's possible. You're always starting with a blank canvas. And that's what's given me strength. " [3, 7th par.]

These statements contain creative strategies for dealing with uncertainty that are, at their core, universal and typical of artistic work even beyond film projects. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the potential of the artistic mindset in project management. Starting from the Cynefin framework, which points to appropriate patterns of action in the face of various degrees of uncertainty, it presents parallels in artistic thought and action and classifies them as strategies for coping with uncertainty and modeling reality. From the peculiarities of the artistic process, elements of an artistic sensemaking are derived that can be transferred to conventional project and crisis management.

Uncertainty as a catalyst for creativity

Critical situations in which those responsible have to act under time pressure and information deficits can hardly be avoided in project management, because projects are associated with greater or lesser uncertainty. When this uncertainty assumes such serious proportions that neither the initial situation nor suitable alternative courses of action can be reasonably assessed, a crisis scenario unfolds that acutely endangers the goals of those involved and their relationships with one another. In crises, the pressure of time and decision-making intensifies; hesitation and wrong decisions have consequences that threaten the existence of the company [4].

Unexpected events cannot be handled with planning. They require not only flexibility in dealing with project management standards and routines, but also openness to unconventional, situation-appropriate solutions [5, 6]. Experienced project managers rely on intuition and implicit knowledge to remain capable of acting: they improvise [7] and thus use a mode of action that plays an important role in dance, theater and music as a performance and research practice.

Artists have become role models for innovation and leadership [8, 9] because they are considered the creative profession par excellence. They are able to transform the unknown and unexpected into novel works. Enduring uncertainty and ambiguity and managing them creatively is a necessary prerequisite for artistic creation. This has made the artistic process a blueprint for agile methods and disruptive innovation [10, 11]. Using action models from management, specifics of artistic ways of working can be combined with project management.

Creative action in cynefin

In critical situations, those responsible have to make decisions under time pressure that can have a high impact. The Cynefin framework - pronounced kə'nɛvɪn from the Welsh for "habitat" - is a sensemaking model developed by Edward Snowden that helps decision makers classify situations and problems according to their degree of uncertainty or cause-and-effect relationships and find an appropriate mode of action. The term Cynefin refers to the fact that decision makers have to deal with multiple environmental influences and knowledge categories without being able to fully grasp them rationally. Cynefin has its roots in knowledge management, but can also be applied to project management [12, 13, 14].

The original Cynefin framework has four situational domains: simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic. Each of these domains is associated with a particular approach to decision making, a particular pattern of action (see Figures 1 and 2).
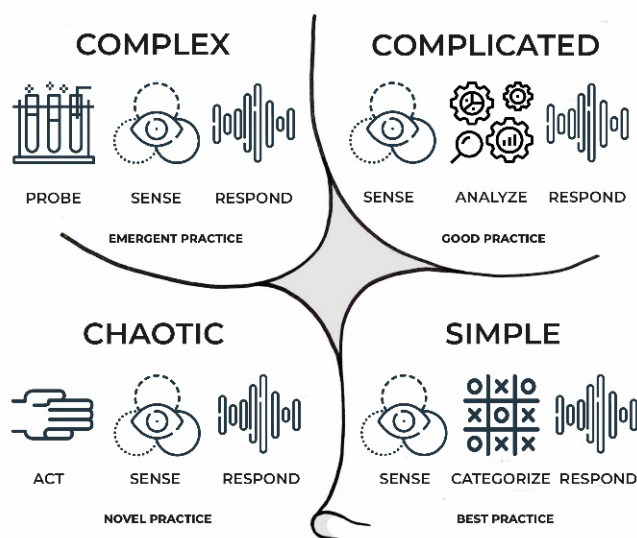

Figure 1: Domains in the Cynefin framework [adapted from 14, p. 72].

A situation is simple when the problem is clearly defined and there is a clear, established solution. Since the causes of the problem and the consequences of the action are obvious, the action is based on a best practice that is appropriate to the problem. The problem is recognized (sense), categorized (categorize), and resolved with an appropriate response

(respond). Imperatives for project management are straightforward communication and the enforcement of guidelines and routines.

A situation is complicated when time and expertise are required to understand the problem and select a suitable solution from several possible alternatives. There are clear cause-effect relationships, but they are not obvious to everyone. Action is therefore based on good practice. The problem is recognized (sense), analyzed (analyze) and addressed with appropriate measures (respond). Complicated problems can be solved well, especially in cooperation with experts.

A complex situation is characterized by the fact that both the problem itself and its solution are unknown. Since causalities are only revealed in retrospect, action is characterized by experimentation. Through trial and error, patterns are identified (emergent practice) until solutions emerge and the situation is merely complicated. An initial probing (probe) and recognition of effects (sense) is followed by action (respond). In the case of complex problems, flexible, open-ended processes with intensive interaction, openness to diversity of opinion, targeted change of perspective and tolerance of errors are more promising than rigid planning.

Chaotic situations are characterized by complete ignorance of problem and solution. Cause-effect relationships are and remain unknown because they change rapidly. Chaotic situations are temporary states because structures emerge on their own over time, but initially solution paths are completely in the dark. Action is therefore not aimed at selecting the best solution, but at finding a completely novel one that works (novel practice). The sequence begins with an immediate action that restores a minimum of order and stability (act). An assessment of the resulting situation (sense) is followed by further measures (respond) aimed at bringing the situation into the realm of complexity. For management, confronting chaos means immediate action and clear top-down communication.

simple	knowns	best practice	sense - categorize - respond
complicated	known unknowns	good practice	sense - analyze - respond
complex	unknown unknowns	emergent practice	probe - sense - respond
chaotic	unknowables	novel practice	act - sense - respond

Figure 2: Problem situations and action patterns in the Cynefin framework [14].

The procedure that the Cynefin framework recommends for complex situations is familiar in sociological action theory under the terms creative action [15] and experience-guided subjective action [16], among others. It is characterized by the fact that both the goals and the paths leading to them are not determined in advance, but develop only in an experimental, quasi-playful process of action [16]. Goals and actions become concrete as the actors interpret a situation, test various alternative courses of action, and let new goals for action emerge from their experience [15].

The concept of experience-led subjectivizing action, which is intended to complement conventional project management approaches, focuses on the subjective perception of events. Activities are not guided by behavioral guidelines and plans that can be objectified, but by individual perception and reflection of the situation. In an ongoing interplay between perception and action, the course of action develops gradually, organically, intuitively, and out of the moment, so that the possibility space expands and creative solutions emerge that would not have been accessible with pure planning [6].

In a plea for experience-guided-subjectifying action, artists inevitably come into view, since artistic work takes place in precisely this mode of action. Artists not only provide illustrative material for the probe-sense-respond of complexity management in the Cynefin framework, but even for immediate action in the sense of an act-sense-respond in the face of chaotic states. With the art-based analogy, the abstract model framework can be illustrated and translated into recommendations for sensemaking in projects.

Art as coping with chaos and complexity

Regardless of the art genre, artistic processes are open-ended and process-oriented. Artists begin work on a work with an intention and a theme. In the process, a certain question or problem is posed, the solution to which is initially just as unimaginable as the work steps that lead to the completed work. Although artists, especially in the performing arts and music, operate under organizational frameworks such as schedules and spatial plans, there is no predefined outcome, process scheme, or plan for the core of their creative work. Artistic goals are conceived and modified during the working process and pursued in a flexible working style [17].

The white canvas or the empty space with which artists are confronted at the beginning of a work has, as a largely open situation, a chaotic character. Artists often find a beginning with an arbitrary setting, a first application of paint, or an impulse in terms of content that triggers an improvisational collection of materials that continues. Artists do not impose intentions on the work that emerges. Rather, it is the material that raises questions and guides the process [18, 19]. For example, it is the material in visual art, the text in drama, and the body in dance that guides the process.

Artists therefore think in a medium. The idea with which the artistic process begins is explored and reflected in this medium. It takes on a concrete form as artists engage in a dialogue with the material and gradually arrive at the final work. Therefore, there is no objective, rational approach or pattern to the artistic process. It evolves from the holistic perception of the moment and in response to the "behavior" of the emerging work [17, 19].

The work on the material is a cyclical interplay of action and perception, in which perception dominates. In this process of exploration, there is a constant alternation between action and intuitive reflection on the continuous change of the material. In the complexity of the artistic process, decision-making is not an expression of planning, but the result of an interaction between artist and work [17, 19].

The artistic process is not linear. Artists regard their work process as an experiment, a search movement that is based on technical rules of the trade and a repertoire of actions learned over the years, but apart from self-chosen ones does not follow any rules of content or process. In this sense, there is no right and no wrong for artists, but a great willingness to fail. Artists tend

to see work crises as a source of inspiration and an impetus to break away from obstructive thought patterns [17].

The artistic mindset is characterized by openness and playfulness. Artists deliberately immerse themselves in the unknown, accepting uncertainty and even deliberately provoking it, in order to explore possibilities extensively and create something original. They approach both familiar and unfamiliar situations with an almost naïve, non-judgmental perspective and the ability to be surprised [17].

When they begin their work, artists deliberately abandon ideas or concepts. They ignore spontaneous associations in order to avoid the danger of repetition and discard obvious steps in order to explore the full range of possibilities [17, 19]. They avoid quick judgments in order to gain experience with their subject and their work, and keep the process of creation and thus their expressive possibilities open as long as possible.

For artists, this kind of unintentional play is a way of reducing complexity [17, 20], because they know that structures and meanings emerge over time, and they have the necessary aesthetic competence to recognize these structures. In this way, artists perform a special form of sensemaking.

Artistic Sensemaking

Sensemaking refers to a socially constructed process in which individuals and groups develop a "vision" or mental model of their environment. In organizations, sensemaking is triggered by events that disrupt routines and involve an excess of information or information deficits, i.e. ambiguity or uncertainty. In such situations, people filter signals from their environment, try to classify this information and act on it [21]. As a sensemaking model, the Cynefin framework implies these different ways of interpreting and shaping reality.

Sensemaking in projects usually aims at agreement, objectivity, and reliability in the sense of prediction and control, and is primarily tied to ratio and language [22]. Artistic sensemaking, on the other hand, is sense-making in a medium that is not necessarily linked to language. Five elements of artistic sensemaking are interesting for transfer to project management: bifocality, multivalence, ambidextry, improvisation, and embodiment (see Figure 3).
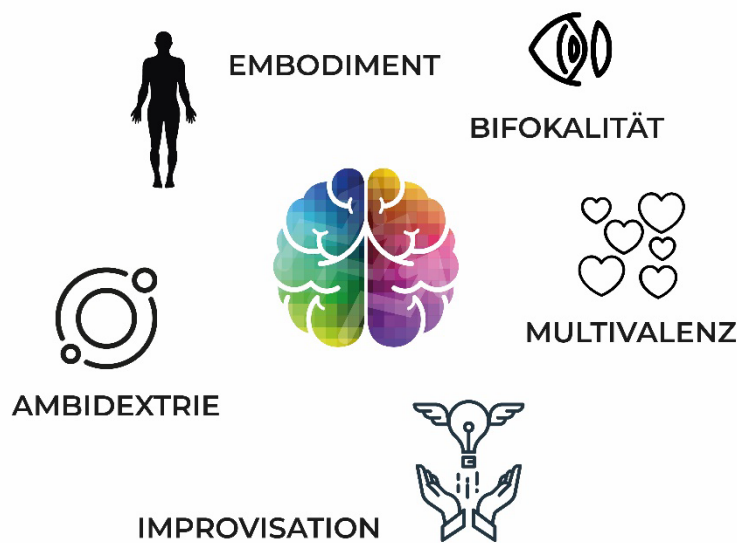
Figure 3: Artistic sensemaking

Bifocality refers to the ability to continuously switch between different visual ranges. It is a switch between detail and holistic perception and a movement between different ways of looking at a problem. It supports the early detection of weak signals and the perception of aspects at the edges of perception that normally go unnoticed. Bifocality includes the willingness to adopt other, possibly completely contrary perspectives. The purposeful change of perspective can be provoked with metaphors and analogies to the original situation or by a break with habitual roles and schemata [23].

Multivalency is an essential feature of collective artistic practice, in which the diversity of values and behaviors is valued and balanced in a participatory process. It involves a play with ideas and interests of different actors, in which there is no one fixed framework to interpret and classify environmental information. Thinking is not subject to selective perception and is not limited to certain facets of a problem. Prejudices and thinking in categories of right and wrong give way to the greatest possible openness to interpretation, with which an overall picture of the situation organically emerges [24].

Ambidextry stands for the use of proven concepts (exploit) and the simultaneous exploration of new solutions (explore) [25]. Artistic action is always based on previous experience and a personal repertoire of craft and expression. At the same time, it systematically challenges the status quo, so that an interplay of expertise and exploratory learning unfolds [24, 26]. The exploration of a theme or problem begins anew with each work and has an uncertain outcome each time, because artists deliberately ignore established thought patterns and successful solutions.

Actors, dancers, and musicians use improvisation not only as a performance practice, but also as a research tool that generates an unprejudiced collection of material on a topic and thus possible solution facets. In this process, perception, interpretation, and spontaneous creation are interwoven; retrospection is immediately followed by the next action [27]. Improvisation

requires a "Yes, and..." mindset that is open to impulses and is accompanied by a willingness to take up these impulses unconditionally and playfully carry them forward. Although improvisation is based on expertise and predetermined parameters of action, it ultimately develops intuitively out of the moment [28].

Embodiment plays a major role in the artistic sensemaking process, because artistic work is based to a large extent on implicit knowledge that is tied to the body and to movement. A "feel" for the material is an expression of kinesthetic-bodily intelligence or embodied cognition that cannot be communicated verbally [29]. Artistic sensemaking goes far beyond cognitive information processing in the sense of combinatory ability and divergent thinking by integrating feelings, body perception, and sensory knowledge into logical thinking [22].

Taken on their own, none of the elements of artistic sensemaking is really new, but when all facets are combined into one paradigm, the result is an original approach that can also be made fruitful for project management. All five elements can be taught or trained using art-based methods. Particular potential lies in the facet of embodiment, which implies sensemaking beyond language and ratio and has been completely neglected in project management discourse so far.

> Project managers who would like to train how to deal with uncertainty in an arts-based workshop free of charge, please contact the author by e-mail. The workshops take place within the research project "Arts-based Learning of Soft Skills in Project Management (AL-Pro)" in cooperation with GPM.

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