Terminating Creative Projects: A Process-Based View

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Abstract

Le travail dans les industries créatives est réputé pour être intrinsèquement ambigu et incertain : connaître les attentes des clients, leur réaction aux nouvelles offres ou les technologies à utiliser pour le développement ne sont que quelques-unes des questions auxquelles les équipes doivent constamment répondre. Logiquement, cela signifie aussi que de nombreux projets n'aboutiront pas ou devront être interrompus prématurément. Pourtant, si la fin de projet est abordée dans la littérature, il existe encore peu de travaux sur la manière de gérer ces situations, en particulier en entreprise créative. La fin de projet est également comprise de manière assez restrictive, ne tenant pas compte des cas où les gestionnaires doivent interrompre un projet plusieurs mois après son lancement, voire avant sa commercialisation. S'appuyant sur 31 entretiens avec des gestionnaires de 9 secteurs créatifs différents, cet article présente une approche procédurale de la fin de projet en entreprises créatives. Il propose notamment des pistes pratiques pour mettre fin à un projet et identifier une série d'actions à entreprendre avant, pendant et après cette fin.

Keywords: fin de projet, gestion de projet, industries créatives, théorie procédurale.

Introduction

Creative projects emerge and creative projects end, such is the normal lifecycle of an inherently ephemeral form of organizing work in inherently uncertain activity sectors (Caves, 2000). For creative organizations, project-based work allows for more flexible (re) configurations of diverse contributors that come together in the pursuit of a joint outcome before disbanding and moving on (Pettica-Harris et al., 2015). Over the years, it has established itself as the go-to approach for conducting work in the creative industries.

The literature on project management accounts for these two crucial stages – beginning and end -, as well as everything that happens in between. It speaks of *pre* and *post*-mortems, stages and gates, agility, scrums, and waterfalls (e.g., Cooper, 1990; 2008; Serrandor & Pinto, 2015; Nelson, 2007; Picq, 2011) but often seems to proceed from an underlying assumption that projects will generally reach completion. As such, this body of work does not explain as well what to do when projects run out of steam and must be terminated prematurely. Or, when it does, it actually speaks of cases that still made it to market but then had to be pulled sooner than expected. (e.g., Havila, et.al, 2013). It highlights the motives for ending projects – the *why* – as well the downsides that come from refusing to do so (e.g., Quiggin, 2012) but leaves the *how* very much open. Likewise, the literature on managing creative settings emphasizes many roles, be it to support exploration, offer guidance, engage in storytelling, facilitate network-building, or enforce constraints (e.g., Simon, 2006; Parmentier & Picq, 2015). But here again, these practices are seldom done with an eye towards premature terminations.

In the context of creative projects, I consider this to be a major oversight. For one, the novelty imperative and the pace at which projects operate imply that a lot of endeavours are bound to fall through (Potts, 2009). In fact, managers should worry about not killing enough projects for it may speak to a lack of risk taking (Pearson, 2016). Having to manage premature endings, then, is no rare occurrence. Yet, the literature mostly focuses on getting from inspiration to market (e.g., Paris & Mahmoud, 2019), overshadowing the many instances where ideas will not actually pan out. Here again, we understand *what* might end up killing creativity (e.g., Amabile, 1998) as well as *why* companies might make that decision (e.g., Dubois and Chalk, 2024) but lack clear guidance on *how* to go about doing it. Of concern is also the fact that mismanaged terminations can alienate existing customers and permanently damage a company's reputation (Sinclair, 2014). Furthermore, while terminations are said to exacerbate tensions and emotional reactions (Wen & Qiang, 2019), we also know that creative workers tend to be more heavily invested and to display stronger than average attachment to their projects (Fahey, 2010). This points to potentially more emotionally loaded and complex situations to handle. Yet, the project management literature still fails to fully take into account the psychological dimension and issues of personal costs (Meredith, et.al, 2017). Last, creative firms are often small and have little

resources to spare (e.g., Hotho & Champion, 2011; Cohendet et al., 2010): mishandling a project termination or failing to salvage key parts of it might jeopardize their survival.

Hence, this study seeks to investigate premature project terminations in creative settings. Based on a series of interviews conducted with 31 managers across 9 different creative sectors, it proposes a process-based view of handling such occurrences and suggests managerial actions that begin from the project's onset and extend beyond its termination. In doing so, this study answers calls for research on project terminations (Wen & Qiang, 2019), in particular in different activity sectors (Havila, et.al, 2013), as well on the emotional dynamics that require management during the life of a project (Meredith, et.al, 2017). It also contributes much-needed "situational project management" insights to support creative managers in dealing with a given challenge (Von Brocke and Lippe, 2015).

Literature Review

Project-based work in the Creative Industries

Organizations in the creative industries are increasingly structured around project-based work (Davies & Sigthorsson, 2013). Indeed, the uncertain and ambiguous nature of their projects, as well as the need to gather different profiles each time around to better innovate, lend themselves well to such flexible structure (Caves, 2000). Its ephemeral dimension limits risks and lends itself well to dealing with customized needs (Winter, et.al, 2006). A project will generally proceed from a fairly rigid set of constraints related to budget, scope, and time, and follow a stage-gate process or more fluid Agile methodology. The former implies a series of pre-defined stages where deliverables and progress are assessed in formal gate instances (Cooper, 1990), whereas the latter describes a more incremental approach that proceeds in short bursts (sprints) and emphasizes constant iterations (Serrador & Pinto, 2015). Many projects will end up adopting a hybrid approach that balances the importance of initial planning with the need to adjust course later on (Boehm, 2002). In either case, projects are typically led by managers who set goals, oversee progress, and coordinate team members towards a clear outcome. They play a vital role in setting the course, monitoring progress, and keeping everyone engaged (Picq, 2011). This

implies drawing from both technical knowledge as well as behavioral competencies to deliver desired outputs and navigate complex interpersonal dynamics. In short, a project manager is a key person that act as a "bridge" between the different stakeholders and sets processes in a way that ensures all goals and needs are being met (Wen & Qiang, 2019)

But project-work in creative settings comes with its own drawbacks. For instance, we know that workers are often presented with unrealistic budgets and deadline that set a premise for unattainable goals and poor work conditions (de Peuter, 2014; Thompson et.al, 2016). Poor planning leads to much more iterations and projects that rarely proceed according to plan (Dubois & Weststar, 2023). In turn, the over reliance on unpaid overtime, as well as inflexible deadlines and expectations negatively impacts teams (Lingered & Packendorff, 2007; Stinchcombe & Heimer, 1985). Creative project-based work often means precarity and tight control which, in turn, lead to anxious workers (An et.al., 2019; Josefsson & Blomberg, 2020; Lindgren, et.al., 2014). While some may tolerate poor conditions for the sake of career-building, most are bound to experience some form of strain over time (Legault & Weststar, 2012; Peticca-Harris et.al, 2015). Some managerial challenges are also more salient in creative projects. For instance, team cohesion may not be as easily achieved given the diversity of profiles required and interpersonal conflict is said to occur frequently (Davies & Sigthorsson, 2013, p.59). In addition, there is a higher-than-average emotional investment in these projects that become intertwined with identities (Lindgren et.al., 2014; Fahey, 2010). Creative workers may also push back against control and seek to maintain freedom (Paris & Ben Mahmoud-Jouini, 2019). In short, stakes, but also emotions, tend to run high in creative settings (Cicmil et.al, 2017).

Hence, managing creative projects calls for a more tailored approach. In particular, specific attention must be paid to nurturing creativity (Cohendet et al., 2017). This includes uniting workers through a collective meaning to build morale, providing communication channels for synergetic collaboration, and creating a safe space for experimentation and "coopetition" (Simon, 2006; Sawyer, 2006). Managers should refrain from exploiting creatives' dedication or to normalize unsustainable practices, but rather to emphasize restraint and work-life balance (Legault and Ouellette, 2012). Parmentier & Picq (2016) also highlight the importance of attending to relationships, while Clarke (2010) posits that interpersonal dynamics are key in what very much amounts to an organized social process.

How constraints are established and negotiated along the course of a project is equally vital. Namely, agreeing on a number of clear constraints has been showed to stimulate creativity, to be quite enabling for workers, to maintain morale and motivation, and to manage the ambiguity of creative projects on an ongoing basis (Bilton et al. 2021; Sawyer, 2006)).

The life and death of creative projects

The project lifecycle is a concept that has become a standard for describing the stages of projects and includes the following four phases: initiation, development, implementation and termination (Meredith et al., 2017, Turner et al., 1999). Here, creative projects do not differ much, if at all, from such stages. Kerr (2006), for instance, shows how video games go from design and prototype to pre-production and production, and ultimately from testing to market. Similarly, Paris and Ben Mahmoud-Jouini (2019) speak of inspiration, framing, prototyping, and validating, while Cohendet et al. (2017) suggest a four-stage process that spans intention building, idea generation, idea conversation, and idea execution. The literature posits that projects can be formed organically or strategically, and will often emerge through networks built from previous projects (Bengston et.al, 2018). Overall goals should be based on the strategic aims of the organization (Mir & Pinnington, 2014), while specific objectives are bound to proceed from a unique set of success criteria (Belassi & Turkel, 1996). Once a team is assembled, projects will typically go through a quick build in momentum (ramp up), achieve peak velocity, and then gradually slow down (ramp down). Success here is generally defined as having delivered a given output within a set deadline and budget (Elmquist & Le Masson, 2009). All projects will eventually end when goals have been met or through extinction, addition, integration, or starvation (Meredith, et al., 2017). Simply put, projects might be deliberately stopped by management, folded into another initiative, be distributed within the organization, or deprived of resources until it dies. In other cases, missed deadlines, ballooning scopes, or budget overruns will likely lead to terminations (van Oorschot et al., 2013). In a creative setting, projects might come to an end if teams lack expertise, skills, or motivation (Amabile, 1998). Conflicts, as well as wavering leadership support, lack of challenge, aversion to risk, and insufficient time can also greatly undermine them (Ekvall, 1997).

Though it may be easy to assume that a project ceases because it is not successful, prior research has found that at times it is simply a case of prioritizing other strategic goals or needs. It is indeed frequent for a given project to be sacrificed so that its resources can be redistributed elsewhere in the organization (Wen & Qiang, 2019). This amounts to a selectionist strategy in which projects with the most promising payoff or displaying the favorable progress get to survive (Pich et al., 2002). Schreier, for example, (2017) describes many video game projects having to "dragoon" staff and funds away from other teams in the studio just to get across the finish line. Likewise, Dubois and Chalk (2024) see intentional terminations as a reparative move meant to attend to overworked teams, disgruntled customers, or rapidly declining offerings. Taking stock of what has been learned as well as unpacking secondary outcomes (i.e., knowledge production, absorptive capacity, etc.) helps to realize that not all terminations are failures (Cohendet et al., 2017). In fact, a project that does not deliver on its initial objectives should be framed as a first step towards a future output provided that organizations are capable of identifying and capturing the most promising outcomes (Elmquist & Le Masson, 2009). The challenge is to not discard ideas with potential and to properly "store" them (Cohendet et al., 2017).

Whatever the reason might be, project terminations remain complex situations to manage. Beyond the fatigue and fast-diminishing resources, we know that workers tend to be distracted by other employment opportunities or status at the end of the project (Turner & Turner, 1999). Premature closings stand to increases stress or anxiety that manifest in conflicts (Wen & Qiang, 2019). In creative settings, some might even experience some form of grief: *the experience of abandonment as a result of creativity may be negative for some individuals. These individuals' stories remain ignored or untold"* (Josefsson & Blomberg, 2020:6). Hence, closing a project is less about technical competencies, but about showcasing soft skills and emotional intelligence (Wen & Qiang, 2019). Here, managers' role includes providing support to their subordinates, along with overseeing the remaining tasks of the project (An et al., 2019). They should also anticipate issues and actively engage in risk management (Havila, et.al, 2013). However, attending to all those responsibilities will often lead to increased stress levels that negatively impact their own ability to perform and wellbeing (An et al., 2019). Managers are also subject to their own blind spots and "information filters" that impair their decision-making ability in these situations (van

Oorschot et al., 2013). It is suggested, instead, that managers should plan ahead and communicate early to allow sufficient teams to prepare for the termination (Clarke, 2010). Debriefing and allocating time for reflexivity through postmortems is also said to be beneficial (Meredith, et al., 2017). Unfortunately, such exercise is often cast aside despite its potential to uncover valuable insights (Josefsson & Blomberg, 2020). As a result, many projects end up closing in a fairly rushed and disorganized manner (Wen & Qiang, 2019).

In any case, the existing literature still tends to focus on the early stages of a project and to neglect the equally important endings (An et al., 2019). This is particularly true for sudden or unexpected premature closings (Havila et al., 2013). Failing to account for these natural occurrences leaves managers unable to respond to fluctuating tensions or to more complex situations (Von Brocke & Lippe, 2015; Winter et al. 2006). In addition, research tends to focus on singular projects and fails to investigate how individuals' experience might carry over into future endeavors (Engwall, 2003; Svejvig and Andersen, 2015). It also emphasizes the competencies that managers should exhibit (Havila et al., 2013; Wen & Quiang, 2019) as opposed to the (sequence of) actions that should be undertaken.

Furthermore, the literature on premature terminations seldom touches on creative settings or projects that get killed before reaching market (e.g., Havila et al., 2013). This is perhaps unsurprising given that the project management literature in general rarely accounts for the processes and methods in the creative industries (Paris & Ben Mahmoud-Jouini, 2019). Yet, considering that innovation and experimentation are seen as routine work in these sectors (Potts, 2009), the lack of specific insights on how to properly close projects is quite problematic. It becomes even riskier knowing that creative ecosystems are generally comprised of small enterprises that can hardly afford to lose key assets – be it people, ideas, or technologies – and who might see their existence threatened by the mishandling of closings (Davis et al., 2009; Cohendet et al., 2010). Small creative organizations face a lot of volatility, and most will not make past five years (Hotho & Champion (2011). Coupled with a general scarcity of resources, it suggests that creative organizations should salvage anything that can later be recombined (Woschke et al., 2017).

Methodology

To investigate terminations of creative projects, I set up a qualitative study that relies on semi-structured interviews. The respondents were initially recruited following an opportunistic sampling approach through my industry network developed through years of researching creative organizations. This experience in the field is also what gives me proper "interactional expertise" to meaningfully engage with the respondents' insights (Collins, 2004). From there, sampling also took on a snowballing form whereby additional respondents were suggested for their potential to contribute to the study. In short, the first few people I spoke to knew of other managers that had gone through similar experiences with project terminations. To be considered for this study, the respondents also had to be in a formal leadership role in a for-profit creative organization. This means that I spoke with different owners, partners, or managers who oversee projects on a day-to-day basis. All of them had led several projects to competition in the past but could also speak to many other instances where they had to prematurely terminate them. The interviews were conducted online through *Zoom* between April and September 2024, lasted on average 45 to 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded for transcription purposes. Prior approval by my institution Ethics' committee was granted and consent was obtained from all the respondents. As time went by, each additional interview, albeit always interesting in itself, revealed fewer and fewer new insights, suggesting that I was reaching saturation. In the end, I spoke to 31 managers across 9 different creative sectors (Table 1), which makes for both a deep and wide pool of respondents from which to explore project terminations.

Creative Sector	# of Respondents	Respondents
Music (recorded and live)	3	R25, R26, R27
Design	4	R15, R20, R23, R24
Video Games	4	R7, R8, R30, R31
Circus Arts	5	R1, R10, R11, R16, R18
Marketing	4	R3, R13, R17, R19
Theme Parks	1	R6
Film and TV	3	R2, R4, R5
Radio	1	R9

Events and Experiences	6	R12, R14, R21, R22, R28, R29

Table 1. Respondents

The analysis approach drew from both process research (Van de Ven, 1992; Garud et al. 2020) and grounded theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Specifically, I began this stage by going through my material – roughly 120 pages of verbatim and notes - to map out (deductive coding) the respondents' comments along a before/during/after process. Such exercise amounts to what Langley (1999) describes as simple temporal bracketing. This gave me three distinct and more manageable data subsets from which I then engaged in two rounds of inductive coding, identifying first-level codes and subsequently grouping them in second-level broader themes and patterns (Table 2).This analysis implied a constant back-in-forth between the interview material and the literature, the occasional moving of excerpts that, upon further scrutiny, turned out to fall elsewhere on the before/during/after process, as well as a re-reading of the three data subsets to ensure that all of the respondents' insights had been properly captured by my second-level codes.

Process stage	First-level codes	Second-Level Codes
Before	*Monitoring conflict, Gauge team, Manage rumors, Communicate vision, Set expectations, Manage expectations, Dose transparency, Define objective, Slow things down, Kill early, Be thorough early, Say no often, Home run slots, Spread investment, Ongoing celebration, Promote experiments, Sign contracts/NDAs*	Framing expectations Controlling the pipeline Shaping the culture Monitoring dynamics
During	*Anticipate reactions, Determine best format, Gather people, Reframe termination, Provide objective data, Listen, Handle emotional reaction, Support employees, Give Praise, Open the door, Stop all costs fast, Make the kill - don't hesitate, Move on, Provide next steps*	Anticipating the hit Breaking the news Processing emotions Handling the business
After	*Patching up, Follow up individually, Remind obligation, Assessing ideas/knowledge, Documenting/Archive, Identify core purpose, Reuse/revisit, Disseminate learnings, Improve the process, Clear the air, Debrief team/post mortem, Celebrate, Prepare for next kill*	Salvaging relationships Salvaging ideas Salvaging teams

Table 2. Coding Process

Last, to add to my findings' trustworthiness, but also account to the fact that my codes stem from a single investigator, I engaged in members' check by sharing a detailed descriptions of my results – including the first and second-level codes – to all respondents (Lincoln and Guba, 1995). The feedback was overwhelmingly positive: participants spoke of the themes' clarity and relevance, as well as the usefulness of the process they depicted.

Results

While I initially went into this research looking at project termination as an *outcome*, I quickly realized that the respondents were actually describing a *process* that implies deliberate managerial actions before, during, and after the termination itself (Figure 1). The results presented below account for this broader scope and unpack all three stages.
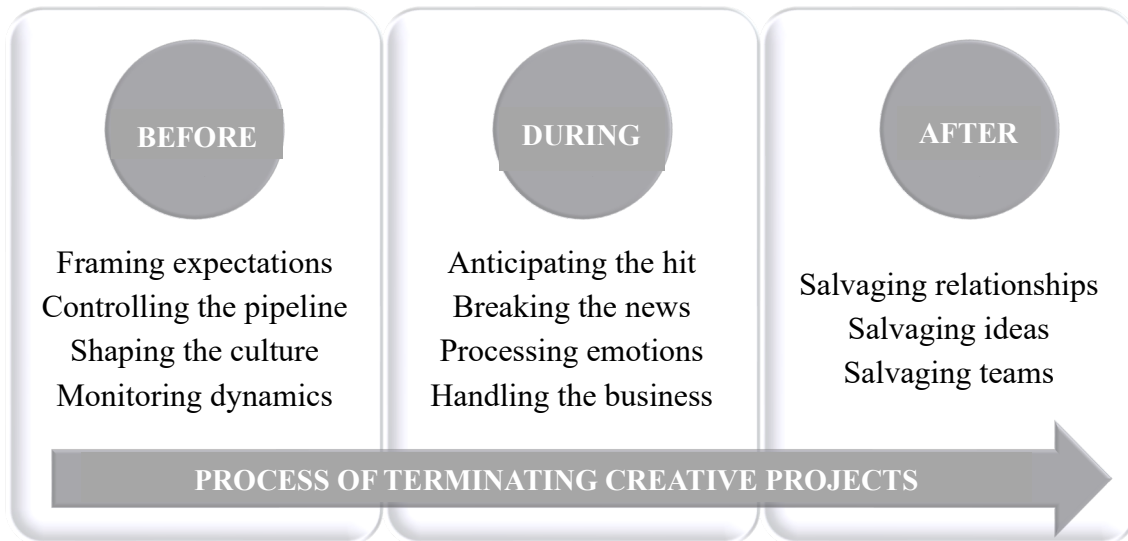

BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
Framing expectations	Anticipating the hit	Salvaging relationships
Controlling the pipeline	Breaking the news	Salvaging ideas
Shaping the culture	Processing emotions	Salvaging teams
Monitoring dynamics	Handling the business	

PROCESS OF TERMINATING CREATIVE PROJECTS

Figure 1. Process of Terminating Creative Projects

Before the termination

The respondents highlight four dimensions – *framing expectations, controlling the pipeline, shaping culture*, and *monitoring dynamics* – that require active management from a creative project's onset. Managing sudden terminations, they argue, begins with trying to avoid them in the first place and establishing conditions to mitigate their negative impacts.

Framing expectations

Ensuring that employees proceed from a shared understanding of the project's objectives, but also with realistic expectations, is deemed essential to creative projects. But doing so also alleviates the risks of dissonance that might jeopardize a project later on, as well as makes visible its uncertain nature. As one respondent explains: "*not strong enough of a vision for a project creates room for interpretations. That's where issues begin*" (R2). It is useful to also include objectives that are not contingent on the project succeeding, and that will have made it a valuable endeavour regardless. As time goes by, managers should ensure that said risks remain visible. Indeed, the thought of termination tends to fade away in the background as each passing gate or milestone brings a false sense of security. "*Getting too comfortable is dangerous. You can be surprised and disappointed if a project fails, but you shouldn't be blindsided by it*" (R4) explains one manager. One way of doing this is to communicate openly about the status of the project and to share insights about head winds so that employees remain mindful and prepared to the ever-possible odds of termination. However, this transparency cannot become crippling either. According to a respondent: "*the further removed you are from information, the more a termination stands to rattle you. But we we don't want our staff to go home worried about cashflow either. We don't generate anxiety over things they can't control*" (R23). As such, it is understood that managers should also dose communications, insulate teams at times, and importantly tackle (unfounded) rumors that arise during the life of a project and stand to create undue tensions.

Controlling the pipeline

Likewise, embarking on projects without the required due diligence or taking on too much work is bound to increase the odds of having to make difficult decisions down the road. Many respondents were adamant about the importance of showing restraint early on and to run a disciplined pipeline: "*I spend a lot more time getting a project started when it's still just an embryo. I'm super stingy with the funnel and reject many ideas early*" (R6). This also implies doubling down on risks assessments and having the courage to say no. Importantly, the respondents emphasize the benefits of slowing down the first few stages

and to pull the plug early to avoid dealing with much more dramatic consequences. As one explains "*it can be a 1-person problem early on, a 9-people one later, or a full on 70-people catastrophe*" (R7). Being too loose from the onset and chasing shiny objects risks leading to future pains. At the same time, respondents recognize the imperative of taking on more audacious and uncertain projects when operating in creative sectors that thrive on novelty. Here, they suggest allocating one or two development slots for such riskier endeavours, what one calls "*potential home runs*" (R15), all the while keeping a tight focus elsewhere.

Shaping the culture

The work that goes in shaping a team or company culture on an ongoing basis can also be done with an eye on potential project terminations. This begins by creating a clear experiment culture in which all understand the uncertain nature of their work and accept the risks that come with the territory. As one respondent explains: "*we've instilled this experimental A-B mindset that helps them understand that there will always be ideas killed for various reasons*" (R19). It also implies acknowledging breakthroughs and recognizing performance on an ongoing basis instead of waiting until the end of a project and risk having such highlights overshadowed by termination concerns. This is highlighted by a manager's comment: "*we celebrate work on an ongoing basis, like every month, as opposed to waiting for the completion of projects because, heck, you never know if you'll make it. This also allows us to also interrogate the project itself*" (R24). An organization that makes unforeseen terminations inherent to its culture will also be proactive with respect to contractual or legal issues. Indeed, it is when things go well that intellectual property rights or confidentially agreements should be agreed on. Further, respondents argue that organizing work in a way to spread employees' emotional investment across multiple projects may alleviate negative reactions later. For instance, a respondent believes that "*when people are working on several projects, their identity is not as tied to a given one and the shock is somewhat lesser. They can always fall back on the other ones*" (R15).

Monitoring dynamics

Last, managers should keep their finger on their team's pulse at all times and be on the lookout for potential interpersonal issues that might grow over time and sink the project. Reading the room and gauging the enthusiasm level is often enough to raise a few red flags. While creative projects are bound to induce tensions and debates, actively monitoring the emotional state might imply terminating early those that stand to implode later on to limit damage. This means, as a respondent argues, that one should always "*get a clear sense of the underlying dynamics within the team to anticipate if there are going to become problematic, often because of a lack of critical distance, or because of power dynamics that suppress discussions*" (R5). In addition, beyond resisting to the lure of embarking in compelling but risky projects, managers should also exercise restraint and refuse to move forward when presented with too big of a challenge for their employees or when dealing with a dysfunctional team. As one explains: "*I'll pull the plug anytime I sense that not everyone wants to claim ownership and assume leadership, or that everyone wants to be involved in the thinking, but no one wants to be in charge of making decisions*" (R12).

During the termination

While working to minimize the odds of termination and attending to these pre-emptive measures is deemed essential, not reaching the finish line is always a possible outcome for creative projects. When that happens, the respondents identify four main dimensions that require deliberate management – *anticipating the hit, breaking the news, processing emotions*, and *handling the business* – during the (acute stage of) termination.

Anticipating the hit

Between the moment the decision is made – or becomes inevitable – to terminate a project and the moment that the team finds out about it, managers should take the time to assess what issues lie ahead of them. As one respondent states: "*we try to understand the level of connection of the people with the project, anticipate how they will react (…) this the most important thing that you can in the meantime*" (R24). Granted, that window may be quite narrow, but many respondents point to the value of anticipating what the news will mean for each employee to strike the right tone, deliver more tailored announcements, and

better identify potential next steps. This might involve first having internal discussions with other managers to get a sense of existing needs and possible landing spots for those impacted. Taking a moment to pause here also affords manager with an opportunity to check their own emotions, craft their message, and determine the most appropriate way to break the news. Here, group meetings may actually be ill-advised: "*it can get very negative, perhaps the dynamic has gone sour and so sometimes an email is the best option. If it's very toxic, there are risks to having meetings that can get personal and very rude*" (R28).

Breaking the news

Communicating in a timely manner remains of the essence, in particular given the risks of losing control over the message. Here, managers will typically convene all the employees in person or online and deliver the news. Said message should be unequivocal about the outcome of the project, but at the same time seek to reframe the termination more positively: "*those are rarely actual failures, people didn't make mistakes, and they should know that*" (R2). Respondents widely believe about the importance of providing objective data and a sound rationale, but also recognize that some employees still will push back and disagree with the decision. As one notes: "*the decision to kill a project should not come across as subjective, most people can wrap their head around objective data and facts*" (R19). This information will often align with what some of the workers were feeling in the first place. Still, no matter how well justified, terminations are still bound to sting. Giving a broad overview of the next steps – which are to be unpacked in later discussions – is also expected at this stage. And, importantly, like any good communication, breaking such difficult news should also include a lot of listening and taking many questions. Whenever possible, managers suggest taking the rest of the day off or allowing a bit of time off for employees to process and blow off steam. According to a respondent: "*sometimes it's best to just close the door and go to the pub. People need to vent frustrations; to have some sort of catharsis moment or else it might make for a really tense postmortem after*" (R21).

Processing emotions

While it is possible that the decision will come as a relief to some, it remains that the shock might be very acute for employees: "*from their standpoint, their dreams won't materialize and their work is getting canned, so it's obviously emotional*" (R6). As such, being prepared to deal with a range of emotions – from anger to sadness and everything in between – is essential for managers. This begins during the announcement itself and ideally into subsequent one-on-one discussions. Of note here is the fact that many managers feel somewhat unequipped to deal with such strong emotional reactions. Gauging individual needs, including at times offering to step away for a few days, is deemed vital to support the sort of grief that come with terminations. As such, managers should clearly make themselves available for further discussions if required and encourage the use of existing support programs. These conversations are also opportunities to take stock of employees' contributions, to give praise where needed and, importantly, to offer reassurance or at the very least some visibility with respect to tenure when applicable. For one respondent "*often what matters the most to them at that stage is to hear that we see and value their efforts, that we feel their pain, and that we hope to work with them again in the future*" (R8).

Handling the business

On a pragmatic level, the respondents emphasize the need to move to stop expenses quickly. Here, the objective is to limit damages and to operate as quick of a turnaround as possible. To do so, managers should be prepared to act in a resolute manner and to not waver, but rather make a clean break. As one of them explains: "*you can't drag your feet here, I mean we can't afford to incur any more expenses on something we know won't generate any revenues*" (R4). Many respondents warn about the temptation to just 'shelve' or 'park' the project rather than terminating it, perhaps hanging on to some hope that things might pick up again soon or thinking that it might be easier on people. As one puts it: "*the worst thing you can do is to half kill it, stretch it out. That's just bad for creatives when the status of a project is unclear*" (R6). Business-related considerations also involve initiating separation when no suitable role can be found and reallocating those who can contribute to other projects. Respondents believe that the latter best follows from talking with employees about their needs and aspirations, but also their appetite for stability or risk coming out of

such subpar experience. In addition to matching people's needs to those of the company, managers should also consider the significance of the next assignment so that employees are not doubly disappointed: from the termination first, and from the new role second.

After the termination

Last, the respondents highlight that the required work extends beyond the moment a decision to terminate is made and announced. They identify three dimensions – *salvaging relationships*, *salvaging ideas*, and *salvaging teams* - that call for special attention.

Salvaging relationships

Without discounting the possibility that the termination may come as a deliverance for some, many of the managers interviewed highlight the need to set up subsequent chats to attend to the important relationship with their subordinates. Any outstanding frustration or question should be tackled then. One respondent points to the fact that "…*trust takes a long time to create but gets destroyed quickly. Maybe we had to move fast with the kill, but we always have to circle back and patch things up with the people*" (R14). Others suggest that something – formal or tacit - may have been broken, that commitment may be wavering if left unaddressed, and warn about terminations becoming unwanted attrition. Even for those who have to be let go of, the respondents recognize the importance of supporting them in their transition as best they can and to leave the relationship in a good state should things pick up again. As one notes: "*I always worry about relationships and reputation. It's everything. You always want to be able to call the person again*" (R22). On a pragmatic level, following up with every individual – still employed or not – might also prove useful to remind them of any contractual obligation related to confidentiality or IP ownership.

Salvaging ideas

Assessing ideas, concepts, or bits and pieces of the project that have the potential to be further developed in the future or used elsewhere in the organization is a key activity that should follow terminations. This begins by documenting the work that has been done, capturing and gathering the relevant material, and archiving it all in a way to make it

searchable or readily available later. But salvaging ideas also implies establishing formal mechanisms or project guidelines to revisit and encourage the use of that material. At the very least, the main learnings or valuable assets should be made explicit and disseminated throughout the organization. However, it should be noted that the respondents also raise limitations to reusing content, be it because it may not age well, is confidential, or touchy to revisit for some – in particular if the project was terminated because of conflict – or imply significant expenses (archiving, storage, etc.) at a time where the company is trying to stop all costs. According to a manager: "*the effort that goes in capturing the knowledge is misunderstood, plus there's an opportunity cost in particular when we're trying to ramp up something else. And then it's time consuming to look at archives*" (R20). Here, another respondent suggests salvaging not the entire concepts or assets per se, but rather simply ensuring that the intent behind them lives on: "*it's about the core structure of the idea, a stripped-down understanding that can be extrapolated. You make modules for the future by capturing the intent and the emotions that you can potentially replicate one day*" (R27).

Salvaging teams

Beyond attending to one-on-one relationships, the respondents are adamant about the importance of looking after the broader team dynamics, in particular if the same individuals are bound to work together again. As one of them denotes: "*we didn't get a game, but we got a better team out of it. We have to protect that. I even think it might bring us closer*" (R31). Here, a carefully structured postmortem will serve to clear the air, reflect on the collective experience, identify process-related learnings, as well as ways to make future terminations less disruptive. The focus, as explained by a manager, "*…is not about pointing fingers. We put our head down, we see if we missed red flags, and we find ways to do better the next time around*" (R29). This is also an opportunity to offer closure to the team by celebrating whatever has been achieved. Setting up presentations or hosting a small get-together are all deemed worthy options. Yet, the respondents raise legitimate reasons to wanting to proceed with caution. For one, managers will not want to exacerbate tensions in conflict-related terminations and will convene the team to debrief only when the dust has settled. One manager explains having "*… waited three months to organize a*

celebration. It was our way to close that chapter and end on a high note" (R17). There may also cost or confidentiality considerations that limit what can be celebrated and how.

Discussion

The findings contribute to the literature in a couple of ways. First, from a project management standpoint, it offers a process-based view that emphasizes key actions over the course of project to lower the occurrences of premature terminations, alleviate their potential impact, and work towards a return to normalcy. Here, process theory offers original "know-how" (Langley et al., 2013) as opposed to merely describing what terminations are. This study also provides much-needed "situational" management insights this complex stage of project lifecycles (Von Brocke and Lippe, 2015). Namely, it shifts the focus away from the required managers' competencies in such instances, as well as promotes a broader understanding of when managing terminations actually begin and end. Managing terminations, in a way, is a latent process of its own within a broader process.

This study also expands the notion of premature terminations to include projects that are often months, if not years, in the making and get killed before reaching market. While the required managerial actions may not fundamentally differ in nature here, there may be more emphasis towards dealing with emotional or relational issues given the grief that comes with "the road not travelled" and conversely less work that goes into capturing technical or knowledge assets in projects that did not live for an extended period of time. This further highlight the need to account for very real human costs that are often lost to financial considerations in the project management literature (Weststar & Dubois, 2023). Rather than treating project churn as a mere technical reality (e.g., Pich et al. 2002), the study brings people-related considerations to the front, in particular when said people are bound to work again in the future. It shows how caring for individuals in creative project-based work, in particular with respect with the shock and uncertainty that comes with endings, implies deliberate managerial actions from the onset. Being cautious in project selection and more thorough with planning, affording more visibility and agency, giving credit where credit is due, and importantly refraining from soliciting more effort on projects that are clearly not going to make it all stand to improve workers' quality of life at work.

Such longer horizon shines a different light on previous conceptualizations of terminations. In particular, while van Oorshot et al. (2013) blamed denial and bias (information filters) for delayed terminations, the findings show instead how making such difficult decision might be facilitated from the very beginning. In other words, it is possible that managers are actually very aware of the situation and might be more inclined to proceed with the termination knowing the house is in order and that they can rely on a clear process to do so. This is also true for workers who, based on the information available and their own gut feeling, might feel more comfortable pulling the plug themselves knowing that their contribution will still be acknowledge, their job is secured, and their colleagues taking care of. They may even take more risks during the course of the project if they sense the presence of a safety net that does not leave them vulnerable to a hard landing later on.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the necessary conditions for successful debriefing and postmortems in such instances. While we knew that such meetings are often overlooked or rushed, this study suggests that managers should at times intentionally delay them or start with more informal gatherings. They may also hold them online or skip them altogether if potentially too negative. In any case, not all projects land themselves to an immediate autopsy and managers should exercise caution. Similar nuances can be made with respect to knowledge management activities that come with attempting to salvage whatever work has been produced. Here, we are reminded of the challenging and time-consuming nature of attempting to articulate tacit ideas or concepts that have yet to be fully fleshed out, but also of the cost that come with storing physical and digital assets, the emotional baggage that they may carry, as well as the important time commitment needed to revisit or redevelop such material down the road. While the literature warns us about the risks of missing out of promising ideas (e.g., Cohendet et al., 2017), this study points to the related not-insignificant work and the need to be prepared to fully move on sometimes. In particular, the criteria used to judge of an idea's suitability for storage should include consideration for its aging potential, archival cost, and dependence on select individuals that may no longer be around when the opportunity for idea revisitation presents itself. As such, it highlights not just a series of 'things' to salvage – ideas, relationships, teams – but a balance to be managed. Specifically, it suggests that managers should be prepared to walk away from promising ideas if the (direct/indirect) costs or the interpersonal tensions are

too high. People-related risks cannot be ignored because of ideas. In doing so, it expands notions of project success beyond what has been delivered or learned by considering how much of those gains have been made at the expense of relationships or team dynamics.

From a creative setting management standpoint, this study demonstrates the importance of planning and managing with an eye towards premature terminations. Namely, while sensemaking and network-building are said to be key managerial roles during the life of a project (e.g. Simon, 2006), the results show how much those still apply after a project has been terminated to support individuals' grieving process and transitions. Importantly, the storytelling around projects and how that translates into clear objectives should also touch on termination, reminding the teams of such possible outcome, but also how their work will always have amounted to something meaningful regardless. Likewise, monitoring interpersonal dynamics and conflicts, or acknowledging contributions go beyond fostering creative settings, but also play a key role in dealing with terminations.

Implications

This study identifies clear parameters and action items to consider from the onset of and throughout the life of a creative project, thereby contributing original insights on the *how* of project terminations. For one, it reminds creative managers of the importance of rigor and restraint early on even though they may not naturally inclined to engage in thorough planning, lay out contractual obligations, and delay the approval of promising new ideas. Indeed, creative organizations still too often exhibit a lack of managerial maturity (Calver, 2020) that manifests in inadequate processes and structures to support their endeavours (Dubois & Bochud, 2024). Taking creative work's inherent unknowability (e.g. Caves, 2000) for a fact and refusing to engage in planning always ends up taking a toll on workers. Here, the study highlights the many dimensions where managers can still exercise agency and diligence despite the ambiguity. On a similar note, managers in creative settings should ensure that teams are kept abreast of potentially project-ending developments and aware of the likelihood of such outcome. The temptation here is to communicate on the positive elements only, opting for a rosy view to avoid negatively

impacting teams. Allowing such disconnect to grow over the course of a project is not just dishonest, it also makes for more dramatic terminations. That said, managers can only do – or be prepared for - so much. Here, the study points to a very wide range of tasks for which they too need to be properly supported, be it to handle the legal considerations upstream of a termination or the grieving later on. As such, creative organizations should further invest in training their managers for these situations and look after their needs too.

More research is warranted on this topic, if anything to account for some of the limitations in the present study. For one, I did not measure the success of the proposed actions against objective criteria and, as such, cannot determine which particular ones are more critical. Future research might opt for a longitudinal design to observe the aftermath of a given termination and the impact of managers' actions, ideally looking at both cases of quick recovery and lasting issues. Comparing specific actions against select performance metrics such as recovery time, employee retention or satisfaction, and sales might also help further set them apart and highlight particularly key actions when terminating projects. Last, factoring the workers' perspective, for instance on what they believe is lacking or on the contrary lessens terminations' impact might also bring key complementary insights.

Conclusion

Understanding that many projects are bound to fall through during their development or experience a much sooner than expected end for different reasons, I set out to investigate how managers in creative settings handled these delicate situations. While the literature accounted for the motives behind the decision to prematurely end a project as well as spoke to the competencies or behaviors that should be exhibited in such instances, this study contributes original insights on how to go about terminating creative projects. It sheds light on key actions across the entire lifespan of projects and beyond, as well as on the numerous dimensions – emotional, technical, knowledge – that require intentional management. While risk and uncertainty come with the territory in creative settings, terminations should not have to jeopardize the survival of firms. As such, this study shows how to minimize negative impacts and to salvage anything worthy of another attempt, without undermining the delicate relationships and dynamics at the heart of creative work.

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