

Power of the people

Brenda Hales and Donnie MacNicol look at the latest thinking in project management and how improvements should be focused on people rather than tools

At a 2007 Association for Project Management debate, Dr. Martin Barnes, noted for his work on the New Engineering Contract, summed up current informed opinion when he said that project management should be “... *much more to do with the interaction of people, clients and stakeholders and the integration of these aspects*”.

Yet ‘silver bullet’ solutions in the form of tools, techniques and processes have dominated our recent history in project management (PM). These have driven the application of technological solutions and have focused:

- the explanations of our projects to our customers, and we often react with surprise when they are disinterested in our Gantt charts
- our development of PM and training for new project managers
- us on the delivery of outputs rather than value.

What we have forgotten in the race to find the technical all-embracing solution is that, in projects, we are working with intrinsically complex situations, with people being among the most complex aspects. We are subjective creatures and no plans, methodologies or processes can remove this. We must embrace a new way of working with the subjectivity of PM by focusing on:

- identifying the behavioural aspects that will bring the most benefit to PM
- working with complexity and subjectivity to optimise the opportunity to craft successful projects
- applying PM concepts in a way that is consistent with the context
- creating value.

The following six guiding principles are useful to remind ourselves of the core of this new way of working with PM. Each should be considered in the light of their impact on individuals, teams and organisations.

Being on the Board – leading PM thinking

“Leadership: The art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it,” **Dwight David Eisenhower**

The core business of many organisations is delivered through projects, yet they rarely have anyone on the board arguing the case for improving business profitability through a focus on best practice PM. The implications of this include ending up with finance systems that do not support the forecasting we need or HR processes that disregard the requirements of short assignments.

In PM we have:

- created a language that keeps others out, e.g. Gantt charts and Earned Value Analysis
- focused on time, cost and quality: not the business imperatives that create value
- assumed people are more interested in our ‘insider speak’ than business issues.

If we want PM to take its rightful place on the board and make a difference to the profitability of organisations, we must shift our focus and become valued contributors to business thinking, direction and decision making.

Recognising, valuing and marshalling the subjective views of customers and stakeholders

“The major barrier to interpersonal communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve or disapprove the statement of the other person,” **Carl Rogers**

Project supporters, detractors and commentators will all react to the same information in entirely different ways. Consequently, no matter how closely we meet the baselined project specification, if the stakeholders are unhappy, it will ultimately be perceived as unsuccessful. To manage this subjectivity, we must:

- recognise the different interpretations made by people from the same base information
- value others’ perceptions of a situation as they are providing a fresh perspective that may improve the decisions made
- marshal people to engage in the decision that is made, recognising that they may not like it.

This is particularly important given the use of alliancing, in its many forms, now being utilised to deliver projects.

‘Working with’ change, resistance and complexity

“The direct use of force is such a poor solution to any problem, it is generally employed only by small children and large nations,” **David Friedman**

Working with:

- *change* means incorporating the disciplines of change management into our project plans, e.g. how do we ensure new tenants will relish the experience of working in their new office space? Instead of our traditional approach of planning for and managing what is changing, we need to understand who will be impacted by the changes and plan for resistance, compliance, acceptance or relish
- *resistance* means viewing it as a learning opportunity. Viewed in this way, it is telling you what is important to that person or group, giving you the opportunity to adapt your approach. Unexpressed dissatisfaction will go underground and the more it does, the harder it is to deal with
- *complexity* means accepting what you are doing is inherently complex. Simple solutions are too often simplistic, masking the reality that you have to deal with.

newPM™...



Focusing on the business context – influencing all decisions and adding value

“To be a leader, you have to make people want to follow you, and nobody wants to follow someone who doesn’t know where he is going,” **Joe Namoth**

Most projects take place in the context of multiple business demands. Typically there are a minimum of two: the organisation undertaking the project and the one receiving it.

To attempt to meet these demands, those leading the project must:

- understand the business drivers of the organisations involved
- create a common understanding of how the project can contribute to business value
- monitor and recheck business understanding remembering that everything is constantly changing – the right decision one day may not be so good in light of later information
- support the collection of this business intelligence
- intelligently apply PM processes.

PM is an enabler for adding value, not an end in itself.

PM leaders encouraging emotional intelligence in all relationships

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself,”

Leo Tolstoy

People ‘think’ through the multiple lenses of their experience, attitudes, beliefs and values. Successes and failures are experiences: since projects depend on people’s perceptions of how they work in, as well as how they experience, projects we are reducing the chances of succeeding if we do not work with this reality. We have found that one of the most useful models for encouraging this shift is Emotional Intelligence (EI). With the evidence and models popularised by Goleman, we find people can quickly grasp the core concepts of:

- self awareness: “Oh, I’m being unreasonably angry with the designer just now, because I crashed the car this morning.”
- self management: “I can ring the designer later, once I have got over crashing the car this morning.”
- awareness of others or empathy: “I’m calling because I imagine you are pretty unhappy with what I said yesterday.”
- relationship management: “I want to hear how we can find ways to work with each other when future conflict arises.”

The good news is that there is a well recognised and straightforward starting point for increasing EI. The bad news is that the starting point can be highly resistant, i.e. you and your self awareness.

Modelling what you say – or not saying it

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world,” **Ghandi**

The project manager is a role model and major influencer on how others will behave. It is incredibly easy for all of us to say one thing and do another and find all sorts of really good self justifications for being so inconsistent. Nothing damages our ability to manage our projects successfully more than losing people’s confidence and trust through being phoney. So, if you say you want a business focus for decisions, make sure it gets due attention at your project review board.

These six guiding principles introduce some of the ways to work with the latest PM thinking, while recognising these words from Ambrose Pierce:

“There is nothing new under the sun, but there are lots of old things we don’t know.”

Brenda Hales is a Senior Consultant with consultancy Team Animation. Donnie MacNicol is Director of Team Animation, a member of the Association for Project Management’s Policy Unit and Chair of its People Specific Interest Group
donnie@teanimation.co.uk