Everyone needs to be a Project Manager

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"We try to fall behind as soon as possible in our projects. That way, it gives us much longer to catch up.".

Today's environment of change

Change is all around us and we work in an increasingly complex environment. Projects in one part of an organisation can often have a major impact on other parts of the organisation. Not so long ago, business planning was typically based on assumptions of reasonable stability and an expectation that next year would be pretty much like this year, plus or minus a few percent. Predictability underpinned many management decisions and it was easy to take "standard" approaches off the shelf and apply them to new situations.

Today's world is much more turbulent and unpredictable, resulting in a need for agility and rapid learning to ensure "what works" can be identified and implemented.

In the "old world", projects were typically managed with an understanding of the "QCT Triangle": Quality, Cost and Time were the three parameters that had to be managed.

Managing projects in the "new world" is far more complex. There needs to be a far greater awareness of the importance of Stakeholders (those people who can influence a project's success). Projects can no longer be disconnected from business objectives; resources are too scarce and projects need to be aligned with key priorities.

Additionally, people's time is constantly under pressure. Project teams may have to be "virtual", with no opportunity to "meet" other than electronically.

Within this context, we have to be more focussed on delivering performance improvements, on time and within budget.

Anyone, at any level, may be asked to lead a project team, or be a project team member. And, increasingly, there are aspects of most people's "day jobs" that require project management skills. The challenge is how to give people those skills, plus the confidence to use them and deliver successful projects.

Project Management is difficult!

Oh no, it's not, despite what many "professional" Project Managers might want you to believe!

Over the past few years our consultants have been facilitating projects and delivering Project skill-development workshops in a variety of organisations in both the private and public sectors. The one thing that characterises all these workshops, irrespective of the client, is the focus on learning new skills by working on real, live projects.

We firmly believe that learning about project management should not be a theoretical exercise, nor should it become a memory test aimed at passing an exam.

We have found there has been an enormous demand in both the public and private sectors to give people, at all levels, practical skills to manage projects (big and small), so that changes can be implemented effectively. This needs to be done in a way that doesn't stifle creativity, yet provides some structure and control – a difficult balance to strike.

In this article we want to describe the approach we have developed and how it has engaged, motivated and built project capabilities across hundreds of people, at all levels.

The approach draws on many examples of good practice in the field of Project Management, adapted to meet specific clients' needs. We're not obsessed with a particular methodology; we're more interested in what is likely to work in a given situation, recognising the prevailing culture, capabilities and improvement objectives.

What do people need to learn?

All our skill-development assignments start with a definition of the desired Learning Objectives.

For Project Management, these usually include the following. People should be able to:

- Explain what a Project is and the characteristics of successful projects

- Describe the key stages in a typical Project life-cycle

- Explain the roles and responsibilities of a Project Manager and how to manage a Project Team, within an overall project governance framework

- Develop a definition and scoping document for a Project

- Identify key stakeholders and plan how to manage those relationships

- Apply Change Control and Risk Management to a Project

- Use some basic project planning and control tools

- Understand and apply the leadership and behavioural skills needed for projects to succeed

The challenge is to create a learning and workshop process that demonstrates the benefits of a structured approach to Project Management by allowing people to work creatively on their own projects. Everyone should come out of the process having moved their projects on and with the confidence to sustain its momentum through to the point of delivering tangible benefits.

We do have one key principle that we suggest clients should apply as a pre-requisite for anyone attending workshops. Everyone should have a live project to work on, or should be starting one very soon. The design of the learning process assumes that participants will be able to work on, and add value to, their own live projects, during the workshops.

A second principle that we apply is that there should be as much emphasis on the soft skills required for successful project management (e.g. leadership, communications, teamwork) as on the "technical" skills (planning, managing risk, change control). This means we are able to avoid the pitfalls of many other "project training courses" where the focus often seems to be on "process" and choosing the right templates to fill in.

The learning process for a typical approach with 3 workshop days involves the following stages:

- pre-work: identifying a current project and gathering available information on it

- days 1 and 2: learning the project approach and applying some basic tools to define and plan the project

- practice: a 4-week gap, back at work, to apply the learning to the project

- day 3: presenting back the achievements, building some of the soft skills and learning further tools for managing the project

- return to work: implementing the action plan developed during the workshop days and completing delivery of the project

What about the methodology?

We've already said that we're not obsessed with a particular methodology, but we do adopt recognised good practices to help people deliver successful projects.

We always introduce the principles of a Project Life-cycle (the typical stages through which every project progresses). We've designed 4, 5 and 6 stage life-cycle models to meet different client needs. The number of stages doesn't really matter; it's the principles that are important and the activities that need to be carried out to progress to a successful outcome.

Our life-cycle models cover:

- Initiating a project: taking a project idea and turning it into something viable

- Defining a project: developing a clear statement of objectives and scope, along with initial analysis of stakeholders and risks

- Planning a project: turning the definition into a detailed plan, with the help of a team

- Implementing a project: turning the plan into action and actually delivering what is required

- Closing a project: ensuring the implemented solution is handed over to "business as usual" and that benefits are being realised

- Reviewing a project: identifying and sharing the learning points so that future projects can be run more effectively

Within each of the project life-cycle stages, we introduce relevant, practical tools and techniques to help people with the "technical" aspects of running their projects and the "people" skills required to ensure all stakeholders are engaged and supportive.

In our experience, it's sometimes the simplest of tools that make the biggest difference. For example, spending time to understand the difference between a project objective and a project deliverable is almost always important. We have met many people who think that deliverables are actually objectives! So, it's not surprising then that their projects fail to identify, or measure, desired outcomes and real business benefits. (IT projects often fall into that trap).

We help people cut through the jargon and get to the heart of running successful projects.

The benefits:

Because participants come to our workshops with a current (or planned) project and make real progress with it during the learning process, the feedback is invariably very positive. People feel they have really achieved something, either in clarifying what they need to do and planning to get it done, or identifying and addressing the issues that have been hindering progress so far.

It might not be true to say that "everyone needs to be a Project Manager". However, it's certainly our experience that people who have been given some basic understanding of project skills and had the opportunity to apply them can be significantly more effective in carrying out their jobs. After all, defining what you need to achieve, setting a plan and managing resources, are relevant skills in most jobs.

Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to manage projects and improve their project skills for nearly two decades.

We are not wedded to a particular methodology. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

It's no surprise that one of the programmes we designed is called "Delivering Successful Projects". It does exactly what it says on the tin!

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to manage and improve your projects.

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