



Coaching the executive project manager: understanding the human element of delivery

Enlisting the help of a professional coach could be the key to project management mastery

The bane of project managers the world over is the inexplicable gap that exists between planning a project and getting it actually to deliver the value it promises to. No matter how much research, forecasting and preparation takes place, there is always the possibility that things may not go according to plan. Why is this?

A coaching perspective reveals that perhaps the traditional project management trade-off triangle of Time, Cost and Quality could do with a rethink. There seems to be an obvious gap – where are People in this formula? After all, it is through people that all processes come to fruition.

Paying too little attention to a project team or to end users can result in project delivery disaster, no matter how much time and money has gone into developing impressive processes and systems, drawing up budgets and developing a product or service.

A recent article by United Kingdom trainer and consultant Timothy R. Barry on the resource website projectsmart.co.uk, titled “The Top 10 Qualities of a Project Manager”, provides a useful starting point to explain why coaching could make all the difference for today’s project manager.

Barry lists the key qualities of a project manager as: inspires a shared vision; good communicator; integrity; enthusiasm; empathy; competence; ability to delegate; cool under pressure; team-building skills; and problem-solving skills.

Immediately, it is clear that the qualities all point to a major core focus – people skills. So again, the need for a more people-oriented project management approach comes to the fore – and coaching has been proven as one of the best ways to develop one’s ‘soft skills’, or leadership qualities.

For example, being a good communicator is important for anyone in a position of leadership, but sadly, little weight is placed on having conversations in the real-world context. We spend more time doing rather than talking and really listening, and in the process, much is missed.

Writes Barry, “The ability to communicate with people at all levels is almost always named as the second-most important skill by project managers and team members. Project leadership calls for clear communication about goals, responsibility, performance, expectations and feedback.”

Good communication also helps to build solid relationships – which is all-important to the project leader, particularly considering that a project team is often

made up of peers or skilled individuals, and a hierarchical leadership approach may therefore not go down very well.

Coaching can improve project leaders’ communication skills dramatically by increasing their awareness. Not in the esoteric sense, but in the very real sense of enabling them to become consciously aware of their own behaviours, the impact they have on those around them, and their emotional state – at all times.

A 360-degree observation – in which the coachee spends time actively observing themselves and their actions within the moment – often proves to be one of the most powerful coaching interventions. Time and again as coaches, we are confronted by people who are completely unaware of the way they behave and the impact they are having on those around them.

Imagine the following situation: A highly ambitious, successful project manager is leading a team of skilled people on a particular project. The deadline is tight and cannot be compromised.

One lady on the team has a sick child with special needs and this means she is unable to work the long hours that every other team member is putting in.

The project leader is frustrated with the woman and feels let down by what is perceived to be a lack of commitment.

The woman feels torn between her demanding work and home lives and feels forced to resign.

The entire project is jeopardised, as the manager is unable to find a suitable replacement in time.

This is a classic example of where increased awareness could have had a major impact – improving both communication and empathy.

As Barry writes, “Empathy presupposes the existence of the object as a separate individual, entitled to his or her own feelings, ideas and emotional history”.

Clearly, the fictional project leader above could do with some more of that!

The coach’s job is to work with the project manager to understand that each team member is first and foremost a person – and that each individual has different needs.

This may seem obvious, but it is, in fact, a common pitfall for many highly driven individuals.

Once this is established, it paves the way for many of Barry’s key qualities to emerge

quite naturally, allowing the project manager to get the most out of each team member in the process.

In essence, heightened awareness is the foundation for all coaching practices – it enables project managers to make the connections between their own emotional state and behaviours, and their impact on those around them.

It also helps to build one’s own sense of integrity – another of Barry’s key project management qualities. Integrity is impacted when we are not aware of our purpose and our values, or when our values and working life are not aligned with each other.

Coaches work with their clients to bring these two areas closer together and as Barry says, “Creating standards for ethical behaviour for oneself and living by these standards, as well as rewarding those who exemplify these practices, are responsibilities of project leaders.”

Integrity essentially builds trust, and trust builds commitment – a crucial ingredient if any project is to

find success, as any project manager will know.

So, from a coach’s perspective, we would conclude that today’s project manager need not only to be functionally competent, but to also have an acute understanding of what it means to manage a team of people – all different, all with some value to add.

Coaching emerges as the ideal means to arrive at this state – and embody Barry’s key qualities – because it puts People at the centre of the Time, Cost and Quality triangle, enabling the project manager to bring together a team with a united focus on quality delivery – something that timelines, and even deadlines, simply cannot do. ☑

Janine Everson is academic director of the Centre for Coaching, based at the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business. Craig O’Flaherty is director of the Centre for Coaching. Telephone 021 406 1148 for more information.