



The people process

High-impact projects are shaped by human resources

Successful project management (according to the textbooks) is generally associated with people who can keep the scope creep monster at bay by ensuring team members stick to strict deadlines and predefined goals – no matter the circumstances or curve balls.

It is a style that delivers results, for sure, but there is another approach to project leading that – if used for the right project at the right time – can go beyond simply meeting objectives to deliver outstanding results. So says Penny Castle, Continuous Business Innovation analyst at Nedbank Property Finance Group.

The style, according to Castle, is one which demands that people, rather than processes, absorb the core focus of the project manager.

“Principles from the coaching profession infuse this approach with a deep understanding of people and team dynamics and show how project leaders can get much more out of them with a simple shift in focus,” she explains.

The shift that Castle speaks of is largely thanks to training she and colleagues at Nedbank have received from the Centre for Coaching at the University of Cape Town’s Graduate School of Business.

Each project manager within the division has undergone some level of training at the Centre in recent years, and Castle says

their newfound coaching-influenced style is delivering value-for-money returns at Nedbank Property Finance.

"In ours and other technical industries, huge amounts of money are spent on designing and developing impressive processes, yet we have found that continually adding and developing new processes delivers less and less value as you progress," says Castle.

"Once a process is more or less established, we have found that getting people to buy in to project goals has a bigger impact on outcomes."

Coming from an information technology background, and schooled in traditional project management principles, Castle admits she would never have uttered these words a couple of years ago.

She describes her previous style of project management as "absolutely uncompromising" and miles away from her attitude today.

"A coaching perspective helps you to put people first," explains Castle. "The hard, process-oriented approach does work – and it is appropriate at times – but I found that I was often getting in my own way by adopting the hard line.

"Coaching has helped me to realise that I could soften my leadership style and still deliver results. Before, I didn't think that was possible."

Castle completed the Professional Coaching Course at the Centre for Coaching in 2009 and describes it as an "amazing experience" that has reignited her enthusiasm for the project management profession.

"I have always been a good project manager and I have always delivered results, but now I deliver results and have fun while doing it," she says.

"In some projects, building consensus is just far more important than anything else. When people care about the project and feel connected to its purpose, the detail inevitably takes care of itself."

Craig O'Flaherty, director of the Centre for Coaching, maintains that this is because people respond better when they are acknowledged as individuals rather than as cogs in the process machine.

"When you acknowledge that people are your most important asset – and then treat them that way – it is easier to maintain enthusiasm and commitment levels within a team. Too often we hear managers making that claim, but then spend whole meetings solely focused on process details and deadlines," he says.

The approach is neatly summed up in his personal mantra: "conversation x process = impact".

"Coaching helps managers to be more aware of their own strengths and shortcomings, as

People respond better when they are acknowledged as individuals

well as how their behaviour affects those around them. When people come first, project managers can create teams of true project champions," adds O'Flaherty.

This has certainly been the case at Nedbank Property Finance, where Castle says coaching principles are now "part of team culture".

"We now start every meeting with a personal check-in where each person gives some insight into what's going on in their life at that moment. We don't mention work; it's an opportunity to remind us that in addition to our professional roles, we all have other responsibilities, demands and joys in our lives. This really helps to build strong relationships and understanding between team members."

The style is well suited to the types of projects that Nedbank Property Finance handles, and to the organisation as a whole, says Castle.

"We work in a complex and dynamic space, both in terms of our industry and our particular organisational structure.

"Nedbank Property Finance is essentially made up of three merged companies situated in three different regions, with

different ways of doing things and different heads at each.

"Under these circumstances, getting everyone to walk in the same direction has proved extremely valuable. People are no longer fighting their corner, everyone is listened to and respected, so people are more willing to compromise and work together to a greater purpose," she adds.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this more flexible – some may even say "soft" – approach is delivering hard results. Castle says that project plans, and even goals, are able to change and develop throughout the project life cycle, which means results are more closely linked to organisational needs and industry changes when the project is over.

"We aren't afraid to modify, change and correct things as we go – and that's normally a big no-no for project managers," she shares.

The successes that Nedbank Property Finance has had have not gone unnoticed at its parent company either. Castle says Nedbank is currently considering a three-tiered approach to rolling out coaching across the entire company – recognising it as a competence for all managers and senior specialists within the organisation.

"We can honestly say that, in terms of return on investment, coaching far outperforms any traditional training methods we have used," she claims.

This bang for buck, says Janine Everson (academic director of the Centre for Coaching), is something organisations continually report back on.

"Working with processes will only get you so far," she explains. "Coaching works at a much deeper level, and it is at that level that real and meaningful changes can take place.

"The trend of taking a coaching approach to traditionally 'hard' business functions like project management is set to continue as companies recognise that real value is unlocked only when people are connected and engaged with a purpose." ☑

Melanie Blythe

For more information on coaching, visit www.centreforcoaching.co.za.