

## Educating Programme Managers to be Leaders

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### Abstract

The discipline of Programme Management, following in part on the acceptance and adoption of project management, is becoming increasingly valued in both the private and public sectors for delivering change. In the organisations we work with and speak to there is a growing expectation that Programme Managers will move from being responsible for managing the process of programme management to taking the role of a leader – taking the necessary action to ensure that benefits are delivered and the programme is perceived as a success in the eyes of key stakeholders. There is therefore a need to identify and develop effective Programme Leaders capable of rising to this challenge.

The paper will consider pertinent questions which we believe must be answered by those responsible for the development of Programme Leaders and those who would benefit from their success. Due to the unique nature of every organisation, there is no single development route and therefore no one size fits all solution which can be provided.

***“For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.”***  
**H. L. Mencken**

The content of this paper is shaped by our ongoing research into developing project and programme leadership which will culminate in the publication of a book on the subject in 2010 with Gower Publishing. This paper is written from the perspective of a consultant working in the Leadership Development field. This perspective does not attempt to provide a rigorous academic discussion as this will be covered in other papers at the conference. The paper instead concentrates on the practical implications for developing effective Programme Leaders and presents a framework for how this can be achieved.

### Introduction

We are at a fascinating point in the development of both project and programme management. A number of drivers are combining; the push for professionalism, the growing ranks of full-time and some-time project and programme managers, a greater understanding of the reason for success and failure, the growing acceptance of importance of projects to business success, the differentiation of programmes and therefore programme management, an economic downturn, growing customer expectations and organisations demanding more leaders.

Why the increased demand for Programme Leadership? In difficult times it is the people with leadership skills who can engage all around them to create success: as success becomes harder to achieve so the demand for more such capable leaders inevitably grows.

Given this demand for more leaders, the challenge most organisations are facing now is how to meet these requirements and develop these leaders. Those who are tasked with fulfilling this leadership gap are asking some recurring questions which form the structure of this paper. The discussion then finishes by outlining a practical framework for putting this thinking into action.

## What are the challenges of being a programme manager?

Every organisation has a different definition and expectation of the role. There is therefore a need to understand what is expected of a Programme Manager to allow the distinction of leadership to be identified. Below are some of the main challenges which Programme Managers must face and help distinguish what is expected of a leader.

1. Translate the political into a reality – understanding and then transforming organisational strategies and expectations into not only technical but also politically feasible, suitable solutions that are supported by stakeholders
2. Deliver across multiple organisational cultures and models – adapting the way in which the programme is structured, managed and perceived
3. Balance the need for flexibility with the need for control – allowing the business to adapt to external events and innovate as appropriate while ensuring sufficient governance
4. Satisfy a broad range of stakeholder needs - leveraging these relationships for the success of the programme by selling the vision and accepting the subjectivity of success
5. Create synergies between projects - to ensure that the collective is “greater than the sum of their parts” therefore justifying the investment in programme management
6. Accept and work with the inevitable resistance to change and complexity that is inherent in many programme given the number of relationships and the uncertainty within them
7. Make resource allocation trade-offs – both in terms of risk as well as opportunity costs – among a collection of competing projects
8. Be responsible for finding answers to any conflicts, clashes of assumption or lack of resources associated with the execution of strategic plans that they had little input into but are constrained by
9. Accept responsibility and accountability without having the organisational authority over what must be accomplished
10. Ensure that projects are controlled and governed and do not affect current operations or future strategic positioning - balance the risks of the programme against the benefits that each project brings individually and collectively
11. Be both advocates for and sceptics of the projects within their programmes - tirelessly support their projects with senior management while guarding against being over-optimistic of any project’s benefits and progress
12. Ensure that the projects work well with other projects in other Programmes - with organisations moving toward system-of-systems solutions, it is imperative that whatever is implemented is flexible and adaptable to future, yet unspecified requirements
13. Finally, and potentially most importantly, consider and satisfy end customer requirements where programmes are the product of the organisation – delivering not only the agreed benefits but also success in the eyes of the key stakeholders.

## What is leadership in general and in this context?

Let’s start by discussing the word leadership. As of 13 May 09, Google had 420,000,000 results for leadership. There are a myriad of definitions, one of my favourites: “being forward-looking, enlisting others in a shared view of the future” put forward by Kouzes and Posner. More importantly, we believe, it is what people experience leadership as being that provides the best definition. “The Leadership Practices Inventory” from the same authors has had over 1 million responses and highlighted the following characteristics as being important for a leader:

- No. 1 - Honesty – similarly for a colleague
- No. 2 - Forward looking - 3 times more desirable than for a colleague

Gadeken similarly describes the behaviours that differentiate top performing Project Managers from studies carried out at the US Defense Systems Management College. The two behaviours that differentiated the top performers were that they were strongly committed to a clear mission and that they also thrive on relationships and influence. In many ways these results broadly reflect the results above.

There is therefore a need to develop Programme Leaders that deliver both the charismatic and instrumental aspects of leadership into the organisation to maximise everyone's ability to contribute to delivering the vision.

### **What are the benefits of developing leadership?**

The Programme Leader who operate in this way are the most successful precisely because they inspire people to "put their hearts" into their work and who create teams that somehow, magically, are "more than the sum of their parts". Below are some of the ultimate benefits we believe come from investment in the development of Programme Leaders:

- Stakeholders "on side"
  - Clearing the way – 'top down' on complex issues
  - Suggesting alternatives and opportunities
  - Influencing and "politicking" for the team
- Programme and project teams willing to:
  - "go the extra mile"
  - Show above duty commitment
  - Resolving problems together
- Suppliers/Partners committed to each other
  - Resolving issues quickly and fairly
  - Creating opportunities together – mutual success focus
- Customers gaining confidence
  - Easing change control and problem resolution
  - Generating repeat business
  - Creating opportunities.

### **Are PM Leadership skills an inherent quality individual Programme Managers either do or do not have?**

We all know people who just seem to be natural leaders. Those who "have it" stand out and inspire all around them. These are the leaders who nurture relationships even when under extreme pressure: who retain the strategic perspective even as problems are erupting. These "just seem to" qualities that the best leaders operate with encourage the theory that leaders are "born not made" and that no amount of development can give, even very competent managers, the ability to truly lead.

There is scope to argue the fundamentals of this assertion but in a practical setting we are unlikely to ever see enough attention devoted to supporting everyone through leadership development. The fact that training budgets are still predominantly devoted to traditional training for Programme Managers, with courses on the tools, processes and procedures of project and programme management, is a telling sign of the lack of understanding in this area.

### **Can PM Leadership skills be taught?**

The short answer is no: traditional competency training provides the building blocks by teaching "what" needs to be done. It misses the subtlety of the "how". Since it is the "how" that differentiates the best leaders (as identified above), training the traditional skills on their own simply cannot impact the required leadership skills. Our experience and research clearly demonstrates that Programme Leaders can be enabled to emerge, but that this requires an

entirely new learning process and focus. Given the unique context within each organisation operates, any educational programme must be aligned to equip participants with the necessary development opportunities to best deal with these challenges. Further to this, creating a cadre of leadership requires cross functional planning within the organisation to link such elements as career planning/assignment management, appraisal/recognition, capacity / demand management and rewards.

For any effective development to occur, those few talented individuals with the potential to become leaders must first be identified. Then the relational, behavioural and E.I. skills so pertinent to leadership must be developed in ways that enable the new Programme Leaders to demonstrably change “how” they operate.

It is the “how” qualities like trust, respect, commitment and passion that are the keys to great leadership capability. Unlike the “what” skills, these leadership competencies are more art than science and are undertaken in individual ways by every leader. The Programme Managers who operate as leaders are the most successful precisely because they inspire people to “put their hearts” into their work: who create teams that are magically “more than the sum of their parts”. They can inspire these heartfelt qualities in others because they have been challenged, usually by other great leaders through their careers, to discover these “how” qualities in themselves. Suddenly it becomes obvious why it is impossible to teach leadership prescriptively: why leadership must be encouraged to emerge, in individual ways from those with talent. A flexible framework is presented later in the paper which is provided as a basis for discussion.

### **What level of commitment do organisations need to commit?**

The scale of the challenge is not to be underestimated. We are very clear with our clients that a 2-day seminar is simply not suitable. To make the necessary behavioural change, we build interventions over the course of 12 to 18 months which is commonly agreed as the minimum period over which this must happen to ensure change.

### **Participant’s commitment**

By its very nature, a leadership development program which has high expectations on those participating must be suitably challenging to achieve the necessary outcomes. The investment, mainly in the time spent by participants, can be considerable. While maximum value will be sought from those making the investment, senior management should be careful not to exert too much pressure or set unrealistic expectations for participants.

That said, it is important for the programme to be aspirational. It should be made clear to those participating that they must commit themselves fully to the programme and make the necessary time and energy available. Participants should therefore be asked to seriously consider the commitment they may be making and the implications for them personally and on their career before either putting themselves forward or agreeing to a nomination.

### **Organisational Commitments**

In our experience the most critical success factor in increasing the likelihood of success of any leadership development programme is the explicit link of its objectives to the organisations strategic objectives, supported by senior management sponsorship. From this will follow the necessary resources, direction and definition of success. It is important to identify what will make the programme a success from the sponsors and stakeholders perspective, being cognisant of the subjectivity and potential changes in this with time.

Communicating the wider link between the programme objectives and the organisations’ strategic objectives to all parties involved is critical. As an example, if the strategic objective is to

increase follow on sales through improved stakeholder relationships, the programme must be designed to focus on achieving the necessary changes in the individual, then in turn teams and the organisation, to support this.

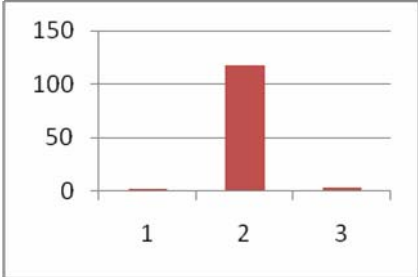
We have seen a general need for Programme Leaders to focus on customers and the delivery of benefits. This raises the issue of how to quantify both the benefits and how to reward those delivering the benefits. Organisations are increasingly asking how their top end Programme Managers can be encouraged to take a business perspective: to become leaders in the true sense of the word.

A benefits focus aligned with key stakeholder relationship management is central to this new approach. For those projects that are delivering to external customers, a lack of a benefits approach significantly reduces the opportunities for “on-selling”. While this is not necessarily the responsibility of the typical Programme Manager, leaders and their organisations are increasingly recognising how this approach could significantly increase their organisation’s success. The problem was clearly demonstrated through a survey we conducted live with an audience of approximately 150 people at the APM Benefits Management Conference earlier in 2009. The question was asked primarily around the role of a Project Manager but are still revealing.

Question 3 was “Do you believe that project managers are “incentivised” in a way that maximises / safeguards the delivery of benefits?” The results were:

- 1. Yes
- 2. No
- 3. No opinion

123 respondents



This, therefore, highlights the challenge for those developing Programme Leaders. To deal with this issue would require a wholesale re-definition of the role of the PM and / or the means of performance management and reward. One attitude which we do believe is important to develop in Programme Leaders is to consider themselves as stewards of future benefit delivery. Decisions they make regarding individual projects or the programme as a whole must therefore be primarily considered against this.

It is important that the systems are in place to ensure the positive behaviours are rewarded, demonstrating the importance and commitment to those on the programme and also the wider community. If there is clarity over how important the business sees the development and level of the challenge – individuals can be incentivised and rewarded accordingly.

**Why focus on developing Project Leadership and not only the Project Leader?**

To be effective the programme must invest at the individual, team and organisational level to be effective. Without support and advantage to teams and changes within the organisation you will limit your chance of success. We think this starts by recognising that PM is at its best when all of the individuals, teams and organisations are fully co-ordinated. This will require those sponsoring the programme to support development within participating teams as well as support organisational changes proposed by and worked on by participants. Such a commitment thereby improves the whole organisation’s capability to identify, encourage, reward and leverage the benefits of its total PM leadership potential. Senior management should

essentially be encouraging those on the programme to challenge the organisation and make the changes necessary to deliver projects and programmes more effectively.

### **How are people chosen?**

As the investment in both effort and direct costs can be considerable, it is important that the group are chosen with care. For an organisation where there is not a fully developed expert group, investment should focus on the top level of the PM community. Where these leaders are in place and for reasons of succession or demand further leadership capacity must be developed, then the next level down should be developed.

The programme should focus the investment on a small cadre of the best at whatever level they work. These people will act as your champions and influence the wider community as well as providing the members of the community to be identified as the best.

There are a number of models for identifying those on the programme. These are typically either through the organisation's talent management process (which is worthy of its own conference!) or through business or self nomination. The latter can be particularly effective because of the programme's aspirational nature. After identifying the broad community from which you believe participants should come you are looking for spirited individuals to put themselves forward for selection.

### **What differentiates programme leadership in one organisation from another?**

Our experience has shown us that one of the most effective ways to encourage enthusiastic support for thinking differently about developing PM leadership skills is to conduct a "Best from Rest" exercise. This identifies what differentiates those leaders who are a success within the organisation therefore potentially indicate the areas that must be developed in others.

The process starts by involving stakeholders in organisations to identify their very best Programme Managers and then conducting an investigation of what makes them the best, in their context. Be clear what behaviours you wish to encourage by identifying who are your best and what makes them your best. The selected "best" are observed, interviewed and undertake 360 reviews so all the significant differences between them and the "rest" are identified. People are typically surprised at just how much the "how" qualities of trust, respect, commitment and passion dominate as discussed earlier.

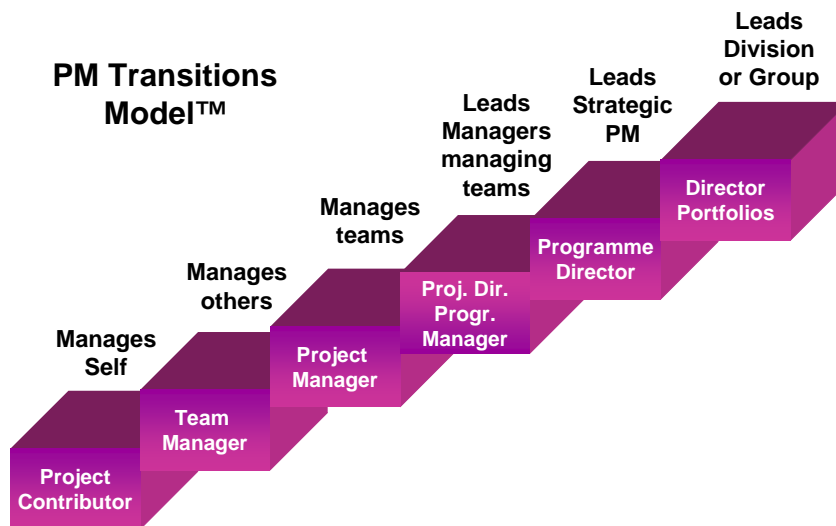
As an example, an organisation whose focus is on gaining market share may most value PMs who can lead successful bids and increase bid – win ratios. Checking this with your future plans enables development priorities that will maximise future ROI to be developed. Discrepancies between now and 'then' can derail your efforts e.g. if the most successful Programme Managers currently take an aggressive approach towards delivery, nurturing these traits will affect the organisation's plans to make a change towards a more customer centric approach. By linking to the future strategy you are encouraging behaviours that will support the organisation and where it wants to go, not necessarily where it has been.

An analysis of the findings is then undertaken, creating a simple behavioural competence model which will aim to identify only those competencies that distinguish the best. In this way the process can be used to identify the transition points expected of people. The model will typically be created considering the organisation's existing Project and Programme Competency Models, if these exist, or by reference to external models such as the APM Competence Framework. The model will then be used as the basis for the design of the Leadership Development Programme.

## What are the challenges of transitioning into the role of the Programme Manager?

Although many Programme Managers are promoted through a number of roles, typically from the role of a Project Manager: few make the transitions necessary. So while their positions become bigger, more prestigious etc they do not undertake a change in how they manage. So it is not infrequent to find project, programme or even portfolio directors enthusiastically rolling up their sleeves to show project contributors how to do the tasks they once did.

Our PM Transition Model™, shown in overview here, highlights the kinds of steps individuals must make if they are to become Programme Leaders.



Making these transitions requires a number of fundamental shifts to be made by the individuals making the change. The Programme Leader must not only make the personal shift but help others to “feel” the transition they are making.

Transition is not a matter of doing more of what was done before; it is more about doing things differently. Some of the changes that must be made are around:

- **Behaviour:** individuals must leave behind the familiar and be challenged to welcome the discomfort that undertaking new ways of doing things will bring. Others must accept that when undertaking new things people will need time to learn; they cannot be fully effective immediately
- **Time:** two changes of perspective are needed:
  - **What the PMs spend their time doing.** As a PM there is much that will occupy them that is focused on the completion of task content. While moving up the steps the focus increasingly shifts to enabling others and business strategy.
  - **The horizon over which the PM is looking.** So an early entry PM is focused predominantly on the end of the project while a Portfolio Director needs to be surveying the whole market place several years ahead.
- **Personal Contribution:** on the basis that “what you value is what you focus on” Programme Leaders must change what they value about their individual contribution and hence what they do. As a Programme Leader transitions upwards their value is more about how they enable others and not what they personally deliver.

Asking Programme Leaders to accept that when they transition they “should” feel uncomfortable and be trying to do unfamiliar things is a real challenge. Yet this is of particular significance to them since at the very core of complex programmes is the need to shepherd others through the inevitable discomfort of change. Of course a Programme Leader may equally come from an operation or business perspective which creates a different set of transitions.

In our experience, it is particularly important to ensure sufficient support is provided during the first 90 days of a person making a transition e.g. from Project to Programme Manager or to a clear leadership role. This is typically supported through coaching which is discussed in the next section when we put forward a framework for discussion.

### **How do you develop Programme Managers?**

Until now we have discussed some of the important features of leadership for Programme Management and ‘what’ can be done. However, this paper’s contribution (and its recurring point) would be undermined if we were not to discuss ‘how’ leadership can be developed. This section is broadly based on the model used by Team Animation to develop Project and Programme Leaders. The aim of sharing this framework is to provide the reader with a basis from which to understand the scale of the task, the elements involved and the real commitment necessary for unlocking the latent potential of your organisation. The reader is encouraged to view this as a point of discussion, rather than an attempt to prescribe a definitive approach.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, there is no one size fits all solution for developing Programme Leaders in an organisation. As well as the differences in organisational requirements and objectives, programmes must also be flexible enough to allow for the individual requirements of the person being developed e.g. learning styles, personal circumstances, availability, etc. Through answering the questions discussed earlier you are then in the position to:

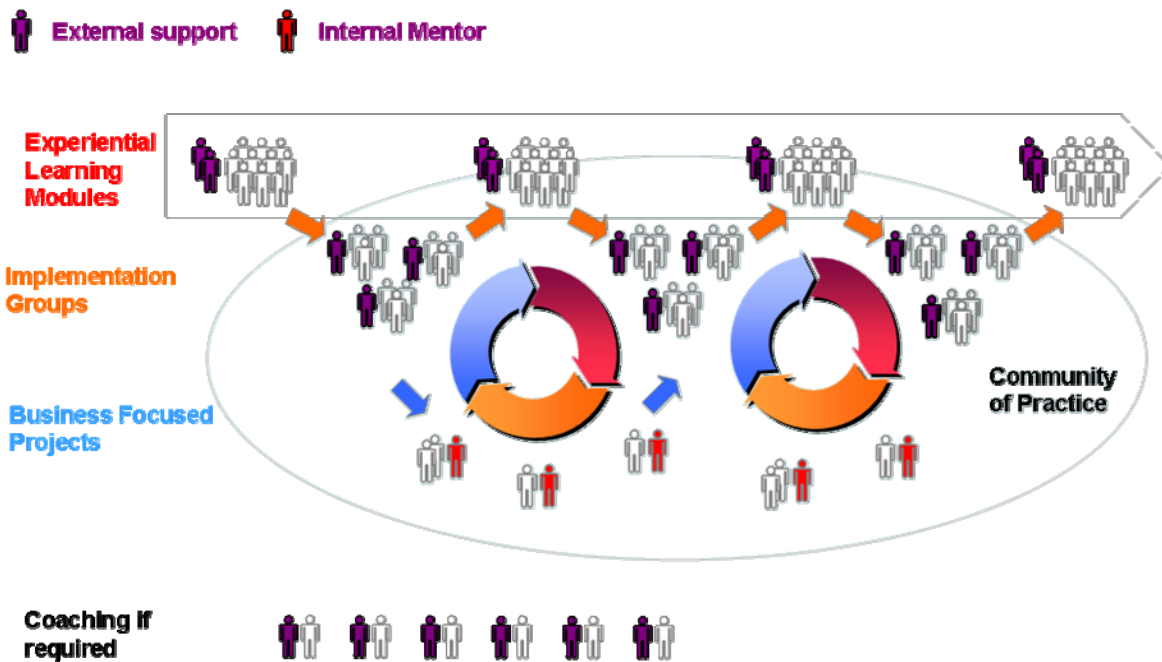
1. set clear goals about what you want from such a programme
2. select those with the talent to participate
3. obtain senior level buy-in.

The first stage in the design of the programme is carrying out a robust Discovery Process to allow the overall structure and initial content and focus to be defined. You must accept that the content of the programme cannot be fully defined at the start. Identify through working with the participants what are the priorities for them as individuals and a group and react accordingly. Thereby modelling the flexibility you are encouraging them to adopt.

Programmes should be based on tested leadership development principles which are now generally well understood while keeping in mind the peculiarities for Programme Managers. Every programme will be different precisely because every organisation will have specific needs. Programmes are at their most effective with eight plus participants who “buy-in” to both the opportunity and the commitment, supported by the organisations’ business leaders.

Programmes last around 18 months: shorter timeframes are unlikely to provide any lasting results as new behaviours may not yet have become habits. Some time must be spent encouraging the active support of senior key stakeholders e.g. assignment owners for planning the most appropriate learning positions for these participants is important for the success of the programme. Interventions should be fundamentally coaching (individual and team) based and focus on how they work rather than what they do. This provides support to the individuals in the most effective way possible and models their move into leadership.

An idealised programme structure is presented below:



### Experiential modules

The most visible aspect of most programmes are the experiential modules. These are typically designed and facilitated by external parties who can bring experience and knowledge from other programmes and industries if thought to be of value.

Group learning occurs in experiential workshops that encourage reflection. This enables individuals to shift “how” they operate and to begin to “get the feel” for best practice on the key PM leadership topics such as optimising team performance and change management. The behavioural learning is both challenging and supportive. Topics like Emotional Intelligence (E.I.) are learnt as an integral component for Programme Management topics like stakeholder management. Such topics often require work done prior to and shortly after sessions to gain maximum value from the time. This should ideally be built into the ‘Implementation Groups’ which will be discussed next.

The modules themselves must be designed to meet the requirements of the programme although in our experience typically the first two modules would have the following focus:

Module 1 - Understanding ones’ self and the business context

Typically includes:

- E.I. with a focus on personal awareness and self control
- Risk Management
- Vision and strategy
- Customer Management
- Business understanding and alignment.

Module 2 - Influencing others – team, client and stakeholders

Typically includes:

- E.I. with a focus on awareness of others and relationship skills
- Team performance

- Coaching approach
- Stakeholder management.

In terms of delivery, planning should include multiple varied interventions to best support a change in behaviours. This multi-pronged approach greatly increases the chance of behavioural change as different people learn and put it into practice in different ways.

You must use an appropriate set of tools such as inventories or psychometrics to provide insight to the individuals about themselves and others. Choosing the right tool for the job will depend on the objectives of the programme. You need to ensure the programme adds to what has already been invested in by the organisation. The use and intelligent application of previous work on methodologies, systems and processes can be enhanced by focusing on the “How” as well as the “What”,

### **Implementation Groups**

Peer learning should be a key part as people will fail and need peers round them for support and to discuss alternative strategies. The greatest learning will come from working through issues with peers in small groups. These are typically set up with around four people to encourage personal implementation as the group works with issues like resistance and risk. Groups should be facilitated, at least initially, by an experienced team coach with the aim of meeting at least twice between modules. Meetings can be used to:

- challenge and support participants to implement what they have learnt and to encourage them to model a mentoring approach; flowing the learning into their teams
- create a peer group that is a power house of new PM initiatives for the organisation. Groups can support Community of Practice initiatives such as cascading of knowledge across the community to share learning and experiences. This ensures the maximum number of people gain from the exercise and it openly demonstrates the business's commitment to development
- to focus on “how” they are operating and implementing their learning and not just “talking about” operating differently. This creates a high cadre group to lead effective PM strategic change
- specific focus on “working with” such PM specific leadership topics as implementing programme change, risk attitudes, lack of hierarchical power and team creation/dispersal.

### **Coaching and mentoring**

Growing bodies of evidence suggest that the key differentiator of successful Programme Leaders is the quality of their relationships: particularly relationships with key stakeholders as discussed earlier in this paper. Coaching and Mentoring is recognised as the ideal way to learn these skills because it takes place through the relationship with the Coach/Mentor enabling learning through:

- Modelling best practise by the Coach / Mentor.
- Challenge and support from someone who “knows the ropes”. Holding up the mirror of reality to the participant's performance.

Immediate benefits in performance can be anticipated as the individuals become more effective in their relationships with others:

- Stakeholder relationships will be enhanced as the participant develops more capacity to work with the subjectivity of success.
- Teams will feel the difference through enhanced resolution of conflict, working with resistance and creating teams that “are more than the sum of their parts”.
- Individuals will experience the participant adopting a coaching approach which is widely accepted as a vital aspect of leadership.

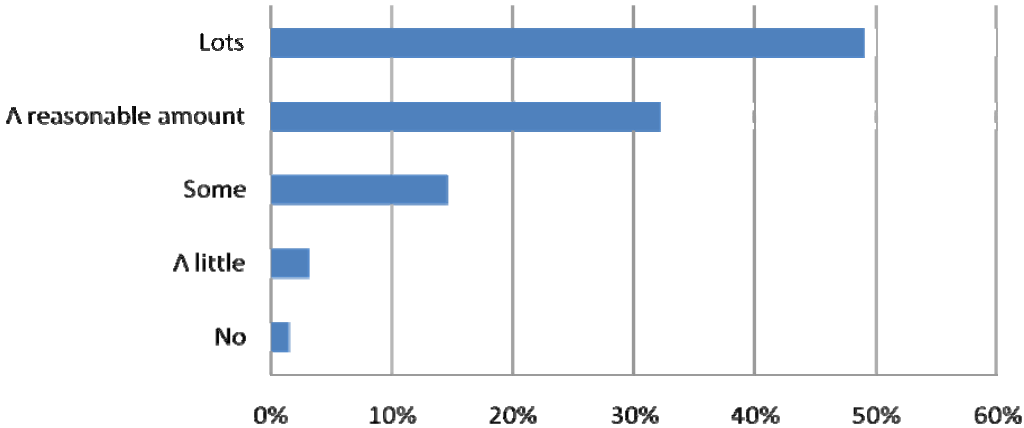
We find that there is additional benefit to the wider organisation when the coaching/mentoring is integrated with the participant's line and HR managers to enable fit with the organisation and increase the probability of participant sustaining change.

Coaching can be particularly effective when participants are making a significant transition to a new leadership role. Coaching and mentoring to provide the personal challenge and support that will identify the individual's style and enable them to make the transitions which were discussed earlier.

90% of people surveyed during our PM Coaching and Mentoring Survey conducted in Q1 2009 believe that as a Project or Programme Manager moves into a leadership role then coaching / mentoring could enable the transition. The results are identified below.

Answer Options	Response Frequency	Response Count
No	1.5%	2
A little	3.1%	4
Some	14.5%	19
A reasonable amount	32.1%	42
Lots	48.9%	64
Comments		38
<i>answered question</i>		131
<i>skipped question</i>		2

**If a PM is moving into a leadership rather than a management role, do you think coaching /mentoring could enable the transition?**

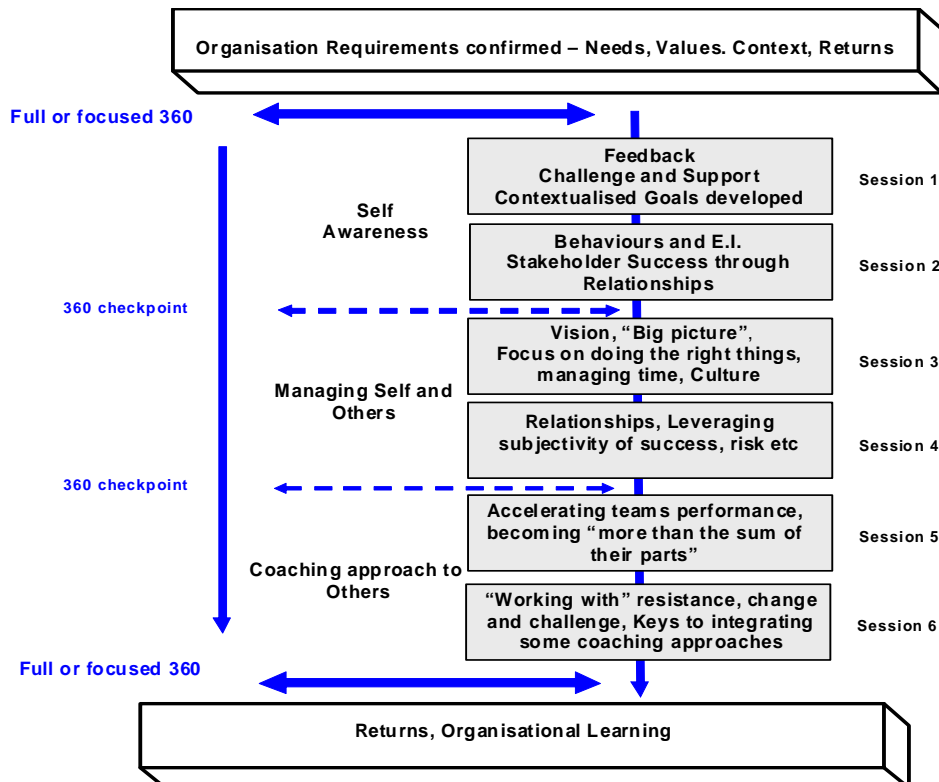


One option we have found to be of particular value is **Structured Coaching** which combines personally focused development with key PM content. This appeals to both the participant and organisation as it provides a pre-defined structure to work through. It contains:

- Coaching to accelerate participants leadership skills, capability and performance
- Content designed to challenge participants to focus on the key aspects of PM success
- Focus on outcomes to ensure less “talking about” change and more “coal face” change.

Structured coaching satisfies the demand for developing PM Leadership by leveraging the more traditional skills of the “*what*” of PM management tools, methodologies etc onto the “*how*” of PM leadership. A typical response to by PMs to accessing their greater leadership capability is, “*I achieve much more by doing less!*”. The approach engages all to deliver individual, team and organisational shift. Through pre-formatted structure and content the known essential elements of PM leadership success are developed, while delivery through coaching enables the individuals own leadership style to emerge.

Organisational “fit for purpose” is designed into the process by first establishing the organisations requirements and within this the individuals needs. Content, number of sessions, feedback can all be shaped to fit context. The above gives an overview of how structured coaching typically works.



## Conclusion

All the evidence from our research across multiple projects, PMs and markets demonstrates it is “*how*” Programme Leaders engage with individuals, teams and organisations that is the real differentiator of success.

Paradoxically the current market provides the ideal opportunity to rethink the investment strategy on how to develop Programme Leaders. Rather than spreading ever more thinly the available investment in traditional PM training, the time is right to target the available investment onto leadership. Since the biggest determinants of team and organisational success are the current and emerging leaders, if an organisation relies on PM success, then this could be just the opportunity to change the focus of PM investment, always remembering that “The opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is conformity” Rollo May.

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