

Educating Programme Managers to Maximise Their Potentials: What Does It Mean?

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ABSTRACT

As projects and programmes become central to organisational and personal success, there is increasing interest in the professionalisation of the discipline and in the education of its *expert* community. The recent Project Leadership Conference (19th May 2009) provides the setting for our discussion on what 'educating programme managers' would entail and the challenges facing Higher Education (HE) institutions as providers. We propose that non-technical, open and reflexive learning are critical for programme managers to develop a rich understanding of their role and to extend their personal effectiveness. We draw on observations from the Cranfield Master in Programme and Project Management to sketch the contours of an institution's attempt to broaden professional managers' willingness to think outside-the-box, thereby maximising their potential to provide leadership within their programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Outsourcing, off-shoring and collaborative partnering have become accepted practices to access resources and share risks as organisations take on larger, more complex challenges. As projects and programmes become central to organisational and personal success, private and corporate membership of practitioner bodies such as the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK and the Project Management Institute (PMI) in the US have risen year-on-year.

Leading project-based organisations such as BT, BAE, Thales and Rolls Royce recognise the need for their employees to up skill. Many have already revised their staff recruitment and personal development policies to favour professional accreditation and to talent manage and fast track employees identified with the potential for high project/programme performance. In turn, responding to the growing appetite for improved competence and professional certification, the APM is working hard to gain Chartered status. Meanwhile, various models of excellence or maturity which offer organisations a framework to identify levels of organisational competence and their respective attributes are being adopted by companies for self evaluation. Hence, the pendulum is fast swinging from a *laissez-faire* approach to project management and development of project managers to a preference for defined standards, expected competence levels and a structure capable of organisational comparison.

Unlike the established legal, medical, accountancy and other traditional professions, there is nothing in the sociology of professions literature to guide us on the education of project or programme managers. This is unsurprising, given project management's embryonic status as a business profession; nonetheless a discussion on the underlying assumptions and process leading to the practice of programme management will have significance for the fledging profession itself – particularly as professional education may be seen as one of systematic mystic promotion and market control. Collins (1979) explains the 'black-art' of a profession:

...requires a real technical skill that produces demonstrable results and can be taught.... The skill must be difficult enough to require training and reliable enough to produce results. But it cannot be too reliable for then outsiders can judge work by its results and control its practitioners by their judgements (p132-133)

Rueschemeyer (1983) describes professions as 'expert occupations' in which standardised assessment and certification legitimise that expertise. This paper joins the on-going debate on the role that this ascribed expertise plays in the actual accomplishment of 'professionalism' at work. The recent Project Leadership Conference (19th May 2009) provides the setting for our present discussion on the challenges facing Higher Education (HE) institutions in educating programme and project managers. We propose that 'non-technical' open and reflexive learning can help programme managers develop a rich understanding of their role and to extend their personal effectiveness. We draw on observations from the Cranfield Master in Programme and Project Management to sketch the contours of an institution's attempt to broaden professional managers' willingness to think outside-the-box, thereby maximising their potentials.

LEADERSHIP IN PROGRAMMES

The common theme emanating from the Project Leadership Conference is *leadership within projects*. Some might argue it is only semantics but therein lies the major challenge: *educating programme managers to do what?* With reference to the project profession, what particular expertise do programme managers have that will give them a professional status beyond that which other general managers can provide? As purists, we would argue that leading and managing are not two sides of a coin. To treat the terms as synonymous or use them interchangeably is to confuse the fundamental role we expect of our programme managers. By definition and in practice, programmes consist of sub-sets of related projects which infer greater responsibility with hopefully, commensurate authority. Take the 2012 Olympics as an example. The infrastructure programme manager's remit is successful stewardship of this time-critical element of the 2012 games. If he/she is operating correctly at the programme level (instead of succumbing to the natural tendency to manage down) his/her focus will not be at the active 'doing' or delivery level (which should be entrusted to the project managers) but on engaging stakeholders (e.g. politicians, the treasury, Olympics officials, other programme and project managers, the public etc) and managing the context (balancing between needs, budget and legacy benefits). Adapting the theme from the Project Leadership Conference, we would say that the programme manager should be providing *leadership within the programme*. This

leads us to the perennial questions of “*what are the characteristics of programme leadership?*” and “*how are these different from conventional leadership?*”

No doubt there will be an overlap in the desired attributes and capabilities between programme and project managers but providing *leadership within programmes* extends beyond operational project management. What we have found in our research is that there is no consensus on the role and characteristics of individuals holding the title *programme manager*. Divergence exists across industry on the level of personal authority, their seniority and status in the organisational hierarchy, remuneration and recognition, programme size and complexity etc. In other words, there is as yet no common language to describe what we expect and want from programme managers.

The functional view of a profession is monopoly through competence and whose longevity is ensured only if the technical skills and knowledge that underline the expertise are not easily replicated. Although the APM is, as we speak, working to define the types and average level of competence deemed sufficient for individuals to be a Chartered Project Professional, it is by no means clear to the world at large whether someone managing a programme is also (or should be) a Chartered Project Professional. As with leaders and managers, the need to differentiate between projects and programmes is essential and therefore the profession itself may be accused of sending mixed signals.

SKILLS, TECHNIQUES, EDUCATION

A tendency permeating through the conference was the conflation of skills with techniques and tools and the assumption that their presence represents leadership. Skills relate to the ‘know-what’ of a situation; the ability to make sense of a problematic context, quickly to grasp the root of tensions between parties and knowing what needs doing to help resolve the matter. Techniques and tools refer to the ‘box of tricks’ that a skilled manager uses for analysis, planning, and decision making (e.g. SWOT analysis, SPRINT analysis, BCG matrix, Gantt chart, Critical Path etc). Skills and techniques can be learned but skills require cognitive reflection and judgement while arguably tools and techniques being processes, may be learned by rote and competence will come with practise. That is, conducting a SWOT or SPRINT analysis is technique driven, but interpreting the results of a SWOT or SPRINT analysis requires skill. Being able to do both well is not necessarily providing leadership, whereas using the information to create an opportunity for the team, organisation or sponsor is leadership. So *how do we educate busy programme managers to step out and lead rather than manage?*

Many still see skills and the ability to select the appropriate tools and techniques as components of leadership. Following this line of argument, educating a programme manager is to equip him/her with a mix of skills and tools and techniques (and hopefully, he/she might exercise some leadership). Indeed to be contentious, it is arguable whether educating programme managers should be significantly different from educating other senior managers. Talking to our students who are experienced programme and project managers, they confirm

that they spend the major part of their day on general management issues; thus demystifying the whole question of what to teach programme managers.

We return to our earlier example of the infrastructure programme manager for the 2012 Olympics. At the very least, the role requires a relevantly qualified technical manager with a successful track record on a similar sized or type of programme. Technical engineering expertise gives the programme manager expert power and his/her referent status comes from demonstrating knowledge from previous successes. Ability to operate at programme rather than project or task level is another fundamental capability. This requires someone equipped with strong critical human management skills. He/she should also have access to suitably qualified and experienced functional experts (e.g. contract and employment law). It is a fallacy to expect a manager at this level to 'know-all'; instead knowing what he/she doesn't know but knowing where and to whom he/she can turn to for assistance is an important leadership property.

Educating programme managers will include addressing 'hard' skills, 'soft' skills, improved business knowledge, personal development and value commitment. The educator's role is to provide aspiring programme managers with a balance of technical project management, people management and key business skills. Programme managers need to be encouraged to demonstrate leadership through behaviour, decisions and actions. To increase self-awareness, create a vision of their career growth and extent their capacity for leadership, personal development is also a critical element of educating programme managers.

Further, we are more inclined towards Dingwall's (1987) conception that acquiring expert knowledge to provide leadership involves the grounding of skills within a value framework. Employers, subordinates and other key stakeholders must be able to discern evidence of value commitment and should be comfortable with what the programme manager represents. Sadly in 'real' life, programmes and projects are invariably constrained by the need to stay within budget, complete on time and to specification and to do so programme managers are focused on the need to manage complexity (e.g. relational, contractual, technical, political, social) and minimise risk. Hence their ability or inclination to exercise leadership is increasingly colonised by the calculative and the instrumental. As a result, the prevailing assumption in industry and by the project profession is the linkage of individual competence, organisational maturity and standardised practices with success. The logic is appealing but it can be too focused on conformance and performance; thereby, possibly stifling ownership, creativity and personal growth as a leader. A challenge to educators is how to 'teach' programme managers to learn to live with uncertainty and to be willing to take some brave decisions such as backing ideas that are innovative and can improve performance.

A CASE ILLUSTRATION

An observation from the Project Leadership Conference and general discussion with our peers is the interchangeable reference to skills-specific training and education. Although one of the

speakers rightly highlighted the over emphasis on processes, the current focus on professionalisation and personal development amongst the programme and project management (PPM) community is in response to increased competitive pressures and the need for risk and reputation management. Similarly, in the wake of the recent National Audit Office report on persistent public project/programme overruns, the Ministry of Defence has embarked on a mission to drive the transition to P3O. The MoD vision is to have each and every individual in a project or programme actively working his/her way through the APM entry certificate and practitioner qualification towards being a certified project manager (and eventually as a Chartered Project Professional). Envisaged to provide high-level knowledge and to help participants develop the important critical skills necessary for programme managers to maximise their potential, the Cranfield MSc PPM programme sits at the top of that ambitious MoD development pathway.

Further observations by the authors and fellow faculty members reflect general concerns about 'relevance' in higher education. In year one of their three year course, the prevailing mindset of many students (and their sponsors) is a correlation between productivity and rational decisions, enabling structures and seamless processes. Module evaluations signal a conflation between training and education expectations. Classroom activities show students' preference for linear problem solving, concern about risk reduction and reliance on plans and schedules. Stakeholders are 'mapped', 'classified' and 'strategies' developed, with little effort to consider the implications of different world views and perspectives – except the probable impact of stakeholders' actions on the project or programme. 'Luckily' for both students and academics, the structure in the first year is deliberately technical, aimed at revisiting and consolidating knowledge and understanding of project and programme management. Dingwall (1987: 369) suggests that the educational process provides:

...a frame of reference, a special rhetoric, a vocabulary of motives and justification and a distinctive methodology for ascertaining facts

Hence it is anticipated that by the end of the first year the incumbents will share (1) a lingua specific to the programmes and projects community and (2) a distinct identity as like-minded project and programme professionals who are seeking to hone their technical expertise. The successful completion of their course will also give them additional credibility as knowledgeable and reflective practitioners among their peers.

An interesting transformation takes place in the second year when the programme accelerates in pace and switches from what has been effectively technical training to discursive education. Subjects are introduced that are not normally a part of a technical manager's knowledge bank. Students have to put aside their 'technical speak' to acquire a new language of socialisation which challenges their hard-wired approaches to human interaction and context complexity. Individual assignments give way to group projects, group presentations, personal reflections and role plays. The changes create a 'senses overload' which is reflected by loud objections about workload, issues with virtual group working, difficulty in learning the new socially

constructed concepts and accompanying sets of analysis tools and techniques and some even questioning their relevance. This is as expected as the operational focus permeates throughout the military, MoD civilian and industry students. Attempts to develop managers' intellectual and emotional maturity and ability to address contextual complexity are met with suspicion, supported by the usual "...yes, this is all very well but it's doesn't work in the 'real' world.....I/we simply don't have the time...the inclination...the resources... etc. etc..." But as proficiency improves, so does appreciation of the relevance and usefulness of the 'non-technical' social solutions.

By the end of year two, module evaluations are more positive about the relevance of the subjects and their transferability to the work place. Interim written testimonials from a cross section of the cohorts indicate a new maturity. Students are still critical if lecturers fail to relate their contents to the module descriptors and learning outcomes, but instead of asking 'do I need to know this?', they now ask, 'how is this relevant for my project?' and 'how can I make use of it to make substantive improvements?' There is a noticeable shift from a rational acceptance of attending the MSc course as a right of passage to something better in the hierarchy, to a genuine willingness to apply the new skills and knowledge back at work for improved effectiveness. Our elation is tempered by the possibility that sponsors' value-for-money concerns, reflected in the oft asked question, 'how much of what they learn can be applied back at the office?' are one of the reasons for students' eagerness to apply their learning.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we explore the learning that programme managers might need. We argue that educating programme managers is in many aspects similar to educating other senior managers. However as programmes and projects are vehicles for outcome deliveries involving different disciplines, a distinctive feature of programme management is the need for the programme manager to have a first qualification that is specific and relevant to the programme domain. To perform their role, programme managers need training to equip them with the requisite technical project management skills. Learning emphasis here should be on making sense of reports and outputs from the programme and projects. To maximise their potential as high performing managers, that basic PM training needs to be supplemented by more discursive education to encourage reflexive learning, and for them to develop a sensitivity to their surroundings that will enable them to develop and maintain relations with the programme's key stakeholders while remaining open to new ideas and approaches. Finally, the need to provide leadership as a programme manager is paramount, and that leadership should include a vision for self-development. Corny as it sounds people follow leaders because they know the way and are able to help others along

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