Performance Pointers

As investment increases, technology becomes more sophisticated and project failures are increasingly exposed to public scrutiny, the role of the project manager has never been so challenging – and indeed the rewards have never been so great. So what is the real secret to delivering an outstanding PM performance?

The answer, of course, is not cut and dried. And with a plethora of methodologies and training available finding the right path to tread to excel in your career is not easy. So we asked three key figures in the PM space to offer a fresh perspective and key advice on how to progress effectively as a 21st century project manager.

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Educate Yourself Successful?

Says Simon Harris

The term "personal development" in itself implies that training, education and learning is entirely the endeavour of the individual. For project capabilities this is less than best argues Simon Harris, an experienced consultant, trainer and mentor in the PM space. To achieve an inherent capability in the organisation, he explains, education and training must include the individual, but also embrace the wider needs of the team on a holistic basis.

Can you educate yourself successful? The bulk of this education and training focussed issue is devoted to that or to a closely linked theme, so lets examine how to best use training to be successful.

I'll also point out right up front that the removal of a single letter from my original title creates a very different question with a very different, more important answer "Educate Ourselves Successful?"

Project Management Is Not the Point

Running projects, or even just participating in projects, is an everyday or life skill, a facet of our real needs. No matter how skilful we become, projects are something never done for their own sake; skilful project management is a means to an end, not the objective in its own right.
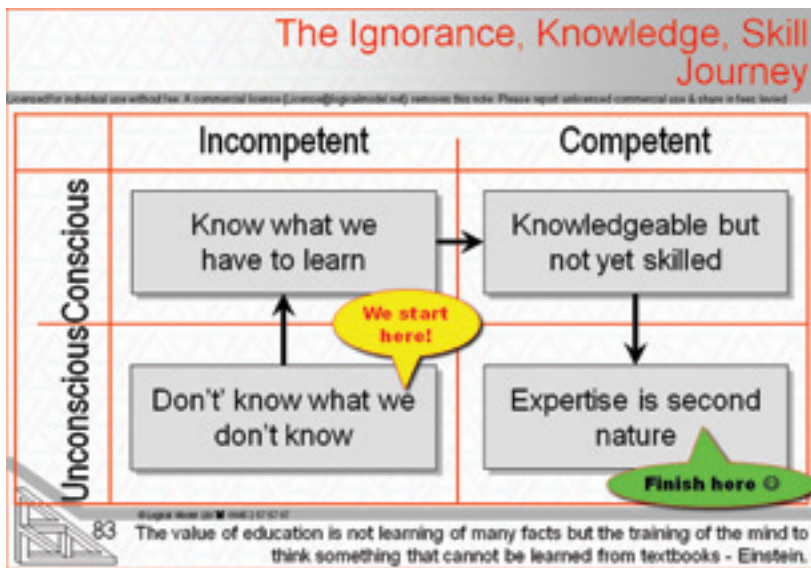
To be skilful means we can do something well; with economy of action and absence of error. Both of which are elements of expertise. Project management is only justified when it enhances value, or speeds up delivery of result or reduces risk of failure. A civil engineer might embrace project skills to coordinate the disciplines needed to construct a hospital, whilst a marketing person may combine efforts from those versed in creating web-sites with the outputs of copywriters to promote a brand.

In all cases, we need project management's 'contents' to be pragmatic and relevant. Following that, if we use project management techniques such as decomposition well by conducting them in stand-up workshops using Post-Its® and walls, this is an unconscious enabler of the whole. The scenario is comparable to driving a car. The activity, although it requires training to learn the skill at the outset, is not consciously part of a weekly shopping trip or a day out with the family. Most of us

can drive a car; few of us are professional bus or F1 drivers. 95% of us have need of a basic and accessible toolkit and 5% have more advanced needs.

On the "Ourselves" theme, note that project management is a skill entirely executed by 'playing well with others'. It is about coordination, so doing it well demands a team, not an individual capability.

The journey from unconsciously incompetent to unconsciously competent

Unconscious competence is the end of a four stage journey. We start with unconscious incompetence (we don't know what we don't know). With exploration comes conscious incompetence (we know what we haven't the expertise to do) then study allows conscious competence.

Conscious competence is the stage at which we can ineffectually and inefficiently approximate the result we want - but only by diverting thought and effort to dealing with coordination and control as overheads. After practice, our skill develops and results are achieved without conscious attention to controlling the process. Now our results are cheaper and or quicker and/or higher quality, but this success is the result of an investment.

The great challenge with project management training is that we train individuals but the application of skill must be as a group. It is the team that has to be able to competently share, for example, calculation of cost, schedule and compromise to meet imposed constraint. In this context 'team' includes boss and sponsor.

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Educate

Education is the transfer of knowledge. Someone who already possesses the skill must make the knowledge explicit so that it can be transmitted, received and internalised by someone else. Explicit knowledge is not directly usable, but it provides the learner with input to make the transition from unconsciously incompetent through consciously incompetent and eventually to unconsciously competent.

For example I could tell you that to ice skate requires that your centre of gravity must act through the base of your skate in the vertical axis and your inertia through the line of the skate in the horizontal. But this knowledge in itself does not mean that you can instruct your muscles to react to your sense of balance in a timely fashion. That takes practice. Practice turns the explicit into implicit and practice requires the giving and using of opportunities.

If you are to educate yourself successful in the conduct of projects then you have to have the opportunity to practice planning, tracking and controlling in the context of pursuing a project objective where achievement of the project's benefits is the real measure of success.

A team is a group with a shared goal and an inter-dependency on each other's technical skills. Project success occurs when the team has absorbed the concepts and principles of some product development capability (e.g. hospital building or web-page development) so that the practice of both technical and project skills are second nature. Project skills add a deft touch that brings coordination across the team's activities for joint control of tasks and time and costs.

'Your' and 'our' success depends on a lot of long steps, up to and beyond attending any training course!

Before a course

Good preparation before a training course, perhaps even before committing to booking one, is to imagine using each of the topics in the course's sales brochure after the course. Who would be involved? Why would they? What would they and you be doing? This is an exercise in exploring and reducing your unconscious incompetence and envisaging the elements of success.

Discuss with your line manager the opportunities that you will need after your training to turn the explicit knowledge you have gained on the course into tacit skill through practice. Opportunities for practice should be undertaken immediately on your return to work and in pursuit of results that are not under close scrutiny due to urgency and importance. You need some slack when turning conscious competence into practiced ease.

Most importantly, agree with your boss before you go that your focus whilst you are physically at the training event is to also remain at the training event mentally throughout. Absorbing new concepts is hard. It needs focus - not distraction at every break. Your absence for one, three or five days away should never be intolerable for you or those you leave behind! If it is, then how will you ever get promoted!!?

In a course

At the training event read ahead in the course notes. Course notes are often brief enough that lunch time is enough to see what is coming in the afternoon and the first evening is enough time to see everything that is coming in a multi-day course. Look for familiar topics and alien ones, imagine using the knowledge, and be ready with your questions. Read the days just gone each day to put new knowledge in a wider context that serial exploration allows.

All internalising of knowledge requires familiarisation that is aided by repetition. Your instructor will have read the course materials many times, even after becoming an expert. If you are to make the most of the educational opportunity then read the materials several times during and after the course.

Also important during a course is to ask questions, answer questions, and summarise back your understanding. Verbalising in your own words boosts both comprehension and retention. At chapter ends write a bullet list of the key points in your own words by skimming the chapter's contents. Also write action statement messages with a due-date for your self.

After the course

Work with your boss to create the right opportunity to practice the knowledge gained. Once a week or once a month review your per-chapter dated action messages and mark those you have started or tick off those concluded.

Even with the least accommodating boss it is always possible to find capacity and scope to practice many of the tools and techniques of leading or managing project activity. A good line manager will greatly aid the process - but you have only yourself to look to if you allow "I can't" to be your mantra. Because, with thought and an eye to opportunity - perhaps outside of work - you can.

Yourself

As adults, our ongoing education is the result of our own conscious choices. Only as young children are we wholly guided. Even then, early on we choose to focus on subjects that interest us and de-emphasise or even avoid those that don't. If you are to educate yourself in adulthood then generally you must have a current need for the knowledge you seek and you must have time to acquire and practice the knowledge. Without these factors the knowledge will not become skill. Crucially, you also need reward, either self-satisfaction or externally generated reward (for example appreciation and or payment) to continue.

When you are a self-motivated seeker of skills then finding knowledge in accessible form and creating the opportunity for practice do not depend on the boss to pay for training and allow time for attendance. Observing others, reading around topics and asking colleagues for support are all potent ways to develop oneself. Colleagues are often very willing to support on-the-job sharing of experience.

Successful

For a business a successful project is one that more than repays its investment. For a team member success is generally the mutual pride for achieving 'tasks completed under control, to quality targets and within the constraints of realistic (neither too constrained nor wasteful) provision of cost and time and resource usage'. For the project manager, success is the coordination of many individual contributions that in total deliver the result asked for within the reasonable (or even unreasonable) constraints imposed on quality, cost, time, resources etc.

Individual success is thus in three parts: job done well, job done to plan, realistic plan created and followed. For the company, successful project management training means translating techniques into day-to-day use by a wide stakeholder community. Typically that is a challenge beyond a lone returnee's ability.

Is Success 'Job Mobility'?

Individuals in any project-related role may judge training's measure of success by the passing of a certificated exam that reads well on the CV/ Resume and enhances job mobility. In truth it is hard to get project management related interviews without the tin-stars, but their "learned in a week, forgotten in a month" torrent of "knowledge" is firstly exam-centred rather than pragmatic and secondly cannot create lasting skills without significant post-training effort. It is the lucid discussion of using pragmatic skills that wins the job at the interview, never the badge of certification.

Personal success may thus be in many parts: Conscious need and desire for relevant skills within a chosen career path, periodic receipt of knowledge, translation of knowledge to skill and expertise, demonstration of the skills to deliver value to project sponsors, plus appreciation (and promotion or and pay-rises!) for the skilled.

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The Curse of Certification

The focus on certificate based filtering applied to individuals in recruitment activities and the intuitive understanding that successful delivery of projects is a social, team based skill has created a destructive meme for the "Educate Ourselves Successful" question.

"Educate Ourselves Successful" requires team based training of teams in many areas that are not in the syllabi of the exams, whilst "exam-cram in a week, forget in a month" approaches mean many of the tools and techniques that a generalist 'already have a day job' person needs are omitted (For example the PRINCE2 syllabus explicitly omits creating schedules!) and the skills that dedicated, specialist project managers should be intimately familiar with never make the transition from classroom (exam paper) to workplace.

Vested interests in 'Bodies of Knowledge', course materials and exam syllabi create resistance to amending shortcomings in the explicitly described expression of project management used for most training. In general the entry level is too esoteric for the 95% majority of "got a day job too" project managers, meaning that the process runs out of steam before delivering industrial strength understanding for the other 5% of specialist full time project staff. "Educating Yourself Successful" by earning a personalised certificate is eroding the wider objective of "Educating Ourselves Successful", which is targeted towards delivering coordinated, collaborative challenges.

Conclusion

As in so many things project-wise, 'Educate Yourself Successful' is a necessity but it is not quite the complete, sufficient whole. The whole needs others besides you.

It needs an instructor or an author or a colleague to share knowledge, as well as a line manager/ boss/ mentor to provide opportunity and reflection. Ultimately it is only 'yourself' who will educate the adult you. If you do not make the opportunities to educate yourself or grasp those that present themselves then no one else will.

Then, having arranged and participated in the purchased elements of education there is much more that is vital to reach reliable, repeatable performance levels from 'ourselves' as a team.

About the author:

Simon Harris PMP, CGEIT, IPMA-D, P2rp, MoRrp has worked in projects since early in his career that started in 1979 at the London Stock Exchange. Since 1990 Simon has worked as a contract project manager for many organisations. Simon's observations from mixing contracting, training and consulting lead him to believe that project management needs a new generation of thinking to be of enduring usefulness. New thinking that leverages existing investments in pm capability and extends it. He tweets about what is needed as @pm_ngt under the hashtag #pm_ngt, blogs and trains in it via www.logicalmodel.net/pm_ngt. #pm_ngt's scope embraces whole-of-investment timefames, builds communication lines whose span is from Boardroom to Boiler-room™, it is pragmatic for all and industrial strength for those who specialise.