

## Leadership, creativity and management

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Times are tough, the economy is in recession, public finances are weak, business is suffering and competition from overseas is growing ever stronger.

It has long been argued that the UK needs to develop into a more competitive knowledge based economy. There is a requirement for leadership to drive up productivity. Leadership and management skills are needed across all sectors; private, public and voluntary.

In this article we explore some reasons for poor performance, the skills needed to manage organisations and what can be done to build leadership, management skills and performance. We particularly go on in this article to focus on project work in the public and voluntary sector

During our work on a range of employability, enterprise and sport contracts a recurring theme emerged of the importance of people. Latterly in work that we have been delivering for The Department for Education and The Big Lottery Fund supporting the £300m *myplace* programme again leadership skills were identified as a key requirement.

People make projects. The really successful projects appear to be led by outstanding people. These are people who have something more than simply technical competence or a specialist skill. Special people can do a lot with little resources.

Leadership is defined by the context in which it is deployed (the leader of a mountain exploration team might not make a great business leader). Sometimes it is only possible to say whether someone was a great leader well after the event. Banking CEOs were lauded and well rewarded in 2007 only to be vilified and hounded from office in 2009.

In the UK and elsewhere we are fascinated by the Richard Branson style, inspirational, leader. But what is actually required is someone in the appropriate context making strategic choices, for sound reasons and explaining and inspiring people to deliver results based on these. A good leader is often the person who can make the complex appear to be simple.

Many countries in Europe appear to have higher productivity than us. There is no reason why Britain should have fewer bosses with leadership traits than them. It is not the case that our leaders have less emotional intelligence, are less personable or less inspirational and charismatic than other developed European countries. But choices of our managers and leaders often appear to be less optimal than our Northern European neighbours.

This lower level of productivity may be more to do in industry with:

- Lower capital investment
- Low levels of R&D (and broader innovation)
- Low value added strategies (restricted GVA)
- Low skills of workforce
- A key ingredient that may have something to do with how people are managed, and organised..

Managers in our country are often highly qualified with relevant business qualifications so why, if we are training more managers, and to a higher level, are we productively weaker?

The UK economy uses mergers and acquisitions as a key strategic management move. Between 1985 and 2007 the volume of M&A activity in the UK expanded 20-fold! Research tells us that most mergers fail to add value. So why are they so popular? According to Ewart Keep of SKOPE, Cardiff University (EDAS conference 2011):

- Organic growth is slower, the stock market wants quick returns
- The risks of M&A failure often do not fall on senior management
- There is a large industry of banks and advisors who make lots of bonus money from M&A

- M&A boosts senior management reward packages in the bidding company.

If M and A trumps organic growth, then long-term investments in infrastructure and research and development become much less important.

Managers will act rationally and will take an easier route. If there is a slack labour market and high unemployment or managers can turn to EU migrant labour then they don't have to manage skilled people well. If there are limited skill shortages and high levels of perceived job insecurity and fear of redundancy then again managers will not focus on the people management side of business.

But special people where can lead and inspire to great things are hard to find. It may be that a project has to call on a number of people to pull together all of the attributes required to make a project successful. Just occasionally these will be found to some degree in one person.

### Project phases and proficiencies

We believe that projects tend to go through three distinct phases.

Though there may be a degree of overlap at times between the phases, it is possible to identify

distinct sets of proficiencies required to make each stage successful.

These phases are:

- Project Development (Imaginative Phase)
- Project Management (Practical Phase)
- Project Implementation Interaction Phase

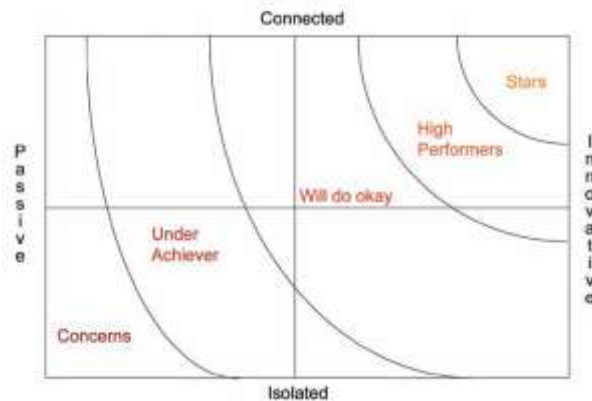
To achieve real innovation, as Active England projects funded by Sport England set out to do, requires a high level of project development proficiencies in the imaginative phase. These projects were intended to test new approaches to drive up participation. Too often projects substitute the use of the right buzzwords and a collection of partner logos for proper imaginative thought during the development phase.

It is here where projects really have an opportunity to push back boundaries and innovate and it is essential that future projects equip themselves with the right proficiencies to enable them to do that.

Really innovative projects begin with creative thinking. People who are proficient in this field tend to be naturally curious. They mix and match ideas from different spheres. They defy logic, blur boundaries, encourage risk taking and they are not fearful of mistakes.

They tend to create a climate in which they and others can experiment with new ideas and new thoughts without fear. They will remain in the imaginative phase for an extended period, only discounting ideas when it is time to appraise them for their practicality.

And real leaders are the kind of people that are connected innovators. They explore new ideas, make links and are prepared to get out making connections and trying new approaches.



### Project development: Enterprise

The enterprise style of individuals can be assessed as one of four categories based upon their intellectual ability, values, attitudes and personality. The categories are:

- expert,
- corporate,
- enterpriser, and
- entrepreneur

For project development an enterpriser profile or someone at the far end of the corporate profile is most appropriate. These are people who can cope well with uncertainty, manage risk, think strategically, focus teams and find creative ways to overcome obstacles.

### Project development: Partnership development

Many projects give the appearance of being based around strong partnerships though this is not always the case. Partnership development has to be about more than simply achieving sign-off and gathering together the logos.

Partnership development requires good networking and facilitation skills and a high degree of empathy.

Successful partnerships show a strong all round commitment to a common cause, involve partners putting something at stake, work at many levels of the organisation and develop a high degree of mutual trust.

These are not easy things to achieve and partnerships of this kind require ongoing nurturing and maintenance.

### Project development: Leadership

With new ideas to consider, many partners and tight deadlines, the 'diplomat' may succeed, but not in the timescale required. There will be times during project development when strong leadership skills will be required to rally everyone around an idea and to develop it against the clock.

Though there are many definitions and analyses of what makes a good leader, in the context of project development it is mostly about being able to do two things well:

- Correctly reading the situation you are in as it changes, and identifying the correct behaviours for taking it forward; and
- Being willing and able to do what needs to be done.

The first proficiency is about listening, empathising and being able to see the big picture. The second set of proficiencies could draw on a range of skills. Decisiveness and a willingness to make unpopular decisions are not in everybody's make up. Leaders though, must have these.

“Successful partnerships show a strong all round commitment to a common cause.”

#### Project development: Facilitation

Facilitation is a proficiency that is essential in the project development phase. It has a part to play in all the four proficiencies we have identified so far.

Great facilitators are good at genuinely involving everybody and valuing their input, even if it does not get used; they summarise and keep things moving; they help identify ways around obstacles to progress; and they make sure that everyone knows what happens next and who is responsible for making things happen.

#### Project development: Writing and communication

Projects can really catch the imagination of partners, funders, staff and participants if they can communicate by writing in a highly engaging way.

In the project development stage, often quite complex arguments have to be distilled and developed so that they have widespread appeal and engage and motivate people.

People respond to powerful stories that they can relate to.

Funders respond to evidence, analysis and extrapolation.

It takes a special skill to combine all of these things and still remain engaging. Yet that is the task of project development.

“People respond to powerful stories that they can relate to.”

Whereas project development is about formulating an idea, its processes, and winning support for it, project management is about bringing it to life.

This requires more practical skills and proficiencies, yet there is some overlap with the creative thinking required in the project development phase. Projects rarely proceed as they were envisaged. So some degree of creative thinking will be required to bring them to life and to overcome the inevitable obstacles and difficulties which may come up.

#### Project management: Organisation

The core task of this part of the project is to pull together and co-ordinate all of the resources required to bring the project to life. These may include finance, people, buildings, transport, equipment and facilities.

Organisers can quickly assess the interrelationships between resources, their phasing and can look ahead in order to create a plan. Importantly they are able to communicate these things clearly and consistently, to those who need to understand, in order to make the project work effectively.

#### Project management: Task orientation

Everybody has task orientation to some degree. At the project management phase a high level of motivation to identify and secure the completion of tasks is an important success factor.

Projects often break new ground or encounter unforeseen difficulties. An important proficiency is the acknowledgement of changes in the environment and the modification of tasks and timescales.

### Project management: People management and delegation

Project managers who try to do everything themselves will soon run out of steam. Yet getting others to achieve tasks is not as easy as it sounds. The ability to delegate and people-manage in a way that truly engages others and gets things done is the hallmark of a great project manager. In community based organisations and sports projects this often means managing both volunteers and paid staff effectively.

### Project management: Creative thinking

The principles of creative thinking outlined in the project development phase will have to be applied from time to time during the project management phase as well.

This is not a clear-cut phase and there will be overlap with the project management phase. The emphasis of this phase is the proficiencies required for successful interaction with project participants.

### Project implementation: Generic working

One of the key themes that has made for better interactions within sport, physical activity and wellbeing projects is the idea of the generic worker. This is where two types of specialist

worker undertake to understand and develop some of the knowledge and proficiencies of their counterparts in order to create a better user experience.

For example at The Salmon Centre in Bermondsey, youth workers and sports development workers have developed an understanding of each other's roles. They have taken on board important principles from each of the disciplines and melded to become a kind of generic worker, occupying the space in between youth work and sports development.

### Project implementation: Performance skills

At an elite level of sport it is important to have coaches who have a high degree of technical competence.

However at the level of encouraging participation it has been suggested that 'performance' skills are a more vital attribute. That is the skills to motivate, inspire, communicate, create a presence and to develop an atmosphere that is fun and participative. It makes people want to come back.

As we stated earlier the leader is defined by the context they are working within.

### Project implementation: Technical competence

Clearly credibility is important and whatever the project, an essential proficiency has to be an appropriate level of technical competence in the area that you are focusing on.

### Key success factors

To stimulate more effective delivery of services it is best to:

- match the right people to the tasks at specific stages of the project life-cycle;
- push innovative approaches during imaginative phase;
- only discount ideas when it is time to appraise them for practicality;
- nurture and maintain your partnerships;
- have a leader willing to take decisive and sometimes unpopular decisions;
- communicate powerful stories in a highly engaging way;
- acknowledge when things change and modify tasks and timescales accordingly;
- build skills in your staff to match tasks needed; and
- employ staff with skills to motivate, inspire, communicate and develop an atmosphere that will encourage people to come back.

A good leader therefore will direct, motivate and inspire. They will provide a guiding sense of purpose. But we should not despair that we need to rely on natural leaders. Leaders are made not born. The skills and approaches can be given and learned. Our ingrained cultural attitudes may slow this process down but it can happen.

But people have been getting away with unacceptable under performance for many years. They have not been sufficiently managed to deliver positive results from their management of services.

For successful delivery in the public, private and voluntary sector we need to set and demand a higher standard.

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