

# DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF MAJOR PROJECT LEADERS



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 8th November 2017

Major projects are being initiated and delivered within increasingly complex networks and under unprecedented public scrutiny. In view of this the very concept of a major project leader is being challenged. At this full day seminar we delved into the full breadth of what it means to lead major projects, now and into the future; from the interplay between culturally diverse individuals through to the constantly changing dynamics of large networks that self-organise.

## THE LEADER AS A HERO IS DEAD

*'A leader's job is to lead upwards, serving their team by creating a space in which they can self-organise and work autonomously aligned with the objectives of the project.'*

Mick Hill, Chief Executive Officer, Greenhouse Integration Ltd

Neither the traditional concept of the leader as a lone hero manfully commanding their troops, nor the more modern concept of a leadership team guiding their colleagues was in strong evidence throughout the day. Rather, the common theme was of leadership as a functional role, dynamic and responsive to the needs of the project's network.

The Bank Station Capacity Upgrade was used as an example of how network analysis can support the building of organisational capability. Research found that Bank Station had a densely interconnected and ever-changing network, and that the team was most effective when allowed to self-organise to meet the changing dynamics of the programme. Key to success was enabling the team to make decisions autonomously with a common understanding of the benefits to be delivered, as defined within the business case.

## AUTONOMOUS DECISION-MAKING

One of the methods for developing autonomous decision-making within teams is by cascading leadership, where right down to the person responsible for keeping the facilities clean, people understand their role in delivering the benefits and take the lead for a contained area. When articulating the benefits of a project, there is a need to go beyond corporate wallpaper. The message needs to be tailored to different groups, with an immediacy that team members can connect with.

The power of autonomous decision-making has been validated through necessity, by teams operating in remote locations such as within the submarine core; here autonomy is balanced by alignment. The 'what' and the 'why' is held centrally by the leadership, but the 'how' is held by the teams, allowing them to deal with uncertainty as it arises with speed and innovation.

*'The only way to work in complex systems is to plan and keep on planning; create autonomous leadership and then stop interfering.'*

Ryan Ramsey, Head of Electricity Construction, National Grid

The Nichols Group has developed a deliberately flat structure, where the leadership role is fulfilled by the person best placed for a particular role. There is a clearly articulated vision to create an environment where creativity and intuition can flourish.

*'Leadership is not what we do to people but what we do with people.'*

Balvinda Sangha, Managing Director, Rockpools Global Resourcing & Consulting Ltd

## CONNECT RATHER THAN COMMUNICATE

Central to leadership in the future is the ability to cross cultural divides and thrive in multiple environments. Common Purpose has defined this as 'cultural intelligence'. It is predicted that 66% of the world's population will live in cities by 2050, with increasing diversity and no clear majority grouping. Talent will convene in these large cities, and leaders without cultural intelligence will struggle to remain relevant.

*'People won't trust you as a leader if you do not reveal your core.'*

Julia Middleton, Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Common Purpose

So how will leaders operate in this type of environment? The need to connect with others starts with understanding one's own personal core and being willing to flex on everything else. This is seen as a balancing act which changes over time. In order to lead diverse teams, there is a need to develop environments where people can share their core -- and perhaps most importantly, be willing to test the boundaries of what they are able to flex.

## ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO REVEAL THEIR CORE

Imagine you are drawing three circles labelled 'past', 'present' and 'future':

- What size would you draw each of these circles?
- Where do you go when you are feeling miserable?
- Which experiences have defined you as a person?  
...then listen and learn.

Leaders need to transcend self-interest, relate to people, and read the project pulse, actively cultivating trust in relationships. This is an arduous and never-ending task, which cannot be limited to just the immediate team. There is a power to connecting with people throughout the supply chain. In fact, the majority of the role of a leader is to facilitate, integrate and connect elements of the team to a wider stakeholder base. Potentially there is a need for dual leadership types on projects: those tasked with looking outwards, and those tasked with looking inwards, connecting and integrating the team.

## FUTURE-PROOFING THE NEXT GENERATION

*'We as a generation failed to recognise what the internet was; the next generation needs to not do the same with artificial intelligence.'*

Julia Middleton, Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Common Purpose

Modern leadership requires us to work and thrive in uncertain environments, willingly stepping into situations which make us uncomfortable, in order to learn. There is a need to be equipped to absorb information continuously and derive insight from it.

*'The shelf life of your learning has changed from 10 to 15 years to 2 to 3 years.'*

Rob Leslie-Carter, Director, Arup

During the panel session the question posed was, 'Can we future-proof the next generation of leaders?' There is a generation rapidly entering the workforce who use digital everywhere in their lives except at work.

How leaders manage at these interfaces between one generation and the next will determine the success of the transition. By their very nature, projects are innovative, seeking to achieve more with less. This is not done through 'group think'. Core to a successful transition is recognising the extent and speed of change, and flattening our structures and routes to leadership to give voice to a mixture of skills and talent. As Frances Nichols stated, 'Variety is the spice of life.'

In networks and flat structures, everyone needs to be willing to step forward to lead in a manner dependent on the requirements of the project. This means taking every opportunity to acquire leadership skills early. In the military, leadership training is extensive, and continually changes to ensure they are training the leaders for this year's war not last century's. Leaders need to be willing to continuously 'top up' their leadership skills, ensuring they remain relevant for the projects they are leading.

*'It is the way we lead today that will have the greatest influence on tomorrow; we want the artificial intelligence algorithms to be based on the best of humanity.'*

Frances Nichols, Chair and Creative Director, The Nichols Group

## POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How can network analysis be used to better understand team dynamics?
- Is there enough education and training of major project leaders?
- What are the best models for achieving collective leadership?
- What are the benefits of behavioural-based continuous learning?

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