

Collaborative leadership: lessons from the 2022 Games and beyond

Highlights

Highlights from the Major
Projects Association event
held on 15th February 2023



**MAJOR PROJECTS
ASSOCIATION**

Moving the dial on leadership capability is one of the Major Projects Association's strategic objectives. This seminar examined leadership through the lens of collaboration.

What can we learn from the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games?

The opening session explored lessons for collaborative leadership from the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games. Introducing the speakers, Deidre Fox, Non-Executive Director of Advance Consultancy, observed that that a common theme of their presentations was the importance of establishing and communicating a common purpose across a complex project made up not just of many organisations but also several thousand volunteers.

Deidre also introduced the theme of acting without a playbook. She observed that the absence of an accepted way of doing things can paradoxically lead to greater collaboration, drawing on her own experience of leading a Brexit transition team for her business. She challenged attendees to reflect if major projects are sometimes over-reliant on repeatability, stifling the scope for new ideas and innovation.

'In collective leadership, a group of people with diverse skills and experience come together to work toward goals that they develop jointly, challenging the notion that individuals are the sole source of leadership.'

Andy Newman, Director of Legacy, Birmingham City Council

Andy Newman, who was Director of Workforce and Volunteering for Birmingham 2022, argued that while the Games benefited from a CEO able to create and instill a unifying vision, it also needed collective leadership to deal with the complexity of delivery. This required a model in which everyone involved felt able to offer leadership as the programme moved through its life cycle. A good analogy is a track cycle team, where each of the four members must take their turn at the front of the group to achieve success.

Collective leadership extended to the Games' 14,000 volunteers. Andy's team created a vision underpinned by a quote from Maya Angelou: 'People may forget what you do, people may forget what you say, but people will never forget how you made them feel.' This provided a blueprint for volunteers to understand how their role was critical to delivering a successful games experience to competitors and visitors alike.

Alex Kirby, who led the design, planning, procurement and delivery of the temporary infrastructure for the Games, stressed that many traditional project management disciplines contributed to collaborative delivery at Birmingham 2022. His work was fundamentally an infrastructure project serving a complex range of clients and stakeholders, whose objectives were not always aligned. As an example, it was a challenge to reconcile the demands of elite athletes during the Games and local authorities seeking legacy. Alex's team had to collaborate with stakeholders to 'right size' the budget and scope, and create a single, cohesive programme that delivered affordability and value for money. This demanded well-structured decision-making forums with clear accountability, fed by high quality information.

James Hamilton, who led the capital programme, had a similar message about project fundamentals. His team brought a series of previously standalone capital projects together under a single integrated baseline that defined the scope of what was to be delivered alongside an integrated cost plan and schedule. A fourth element was a detailed cataloguing of risks that was the basis for collaborative contingency planning. This ensured that while there may have been no playbook, there was a programme 'bible'. The baseline also created a no get out clause for the key partners, which again helped create an environment for effective collaboration towards a shared goal in extremely challenging circumstance.

'You have to prepare well enough so that you can work together when things don't go to plan.'

Jenni MacKenzie, Commonwealth Games Senior Programme Manager, Transport, Transport for the West Midlands

The transport programme for the Games had to bring together 16 partners including local authorities, transport operators and Birmingham 2020 organising committee to deliver a successful operation for the 11 days of competition – while at the same time maintaining a service for millions of people using the complex, congested network of Britain's second largest city.

Jenni MacKenzie explained that against this backdrop, early partner and stakeholder engagement to establish a clear set of roles and responsibilities helped create the flexibility and accountability needed for a high-performing, collaborative team. She stressed that the programme was delivering an operation, so testing and readiness planning was essential to its success. An operations office was established

pre-Games, bringing together all the relevant operators and agencies, first to test the team's readiness and then to manage operations during the Games. This ensured that key players were working together in real time, with clear lines of command and escalation, allowing them to deal with challenges as they arose.

Lesson for collaborative leadership from outside the major projects sector

'I think collaborative leadership is caught by people around you, you can't just talk about it, it's got to be caught in your character, in how you write your emails, it's got to be caught in how you show up to work.'

Mark Russell, CEO, The Children's Society

Providing a perspective from outside of the major projects world, Mark Russell, CEO of The Children's Society offered his ten key learnings for collaborative leadership:

- Leadership matters. Leaders need to be human and accessible.
- Vision matters. Task with no vision is boredom. Vision with no task is useless.
- Values matter. Teams need a shared sense of what truly matters.
- Curiosity and creativity matter. Leaders need to create an environment of psychological safety in which ideas flourish.
- Leaders can't overcommunicate.
- Leaders must establish clarity on governance and decision-making.
- A commitment to co-design is vital. If one party

feels done to, a partnership will not flourish.

- Collaboration needs clarity on what success looks like and how it will be measured.
- Leaders must be learners and take time to reflect and grow.
- Trust is vital. Leaders need to be intentional about growing trust across a partnership.

Insights from academia

To see how our academic members framed the issue of collaborative leadership [read our blog here](#).

Priority actions for leaders aiming to creating a collaborative environment

In the final session attendees broke into groups to identify the priority actions they believe leaders need to take to build an environment in which collaborative leadership can thrive.

The four groups identified a diverse range of actions (see below) but recurring themes included:

- **Clarity of purpose:** Leaders need to be able to create and communicate a vision, outcomes and a set of values that creates a shared purpose for the delivery team and programme stakeholders.
- **Governance:** To empower people at all levels of the project to contribute to collaborative leadership, leaders need to establish clear lines of authority and accountabilities.
- **Behaviour:** The behaviour of leaders needs to express the values of respect, psychological safety, concern for individual wellbeing et al that underpin a collaborative leadership environment.

- Define the golden thread that brings everyone together to make the common purpose relevant to the whole team
- Continuous communication to reinforce messaging
- Model the values, especially in times of adversity

- Make decisions about what's important – including people, what's right and wrong
- Empower leadership at every level – so it is translated to local situation

- Showing that you care on an individual level – actions, not just words

1. Blind trust
- why: authenticity in teams
2. Knowing when to say 'no'
- why: clear objectives
3. Leadership at all levels
- why: to build communication and foster trust



Chair

Deirdre Fox, Non-Executive Director, Advance Consultancy Ltd

Contributors

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Participating organisations

Advance Consultancy Ltd
 Alliance Manchester Business School
 Arcadis LLP
 Arup
 Birmingham 2022
 Birmingham City Council
 Cavendish Nuclear/Babcock
 HS2 Ltd
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