Major Projects Association

Leading Major Project Transitions: Introducing an Extended Model of Leadership Capabilities and Skills



Connecting people, sharing ideas, improving major project outcomes

www.majorprojects.org

MAJOR PROJECTS ASSOCIATION

Authorship

This report is dedicated to the memory of Lauren Schogger who led this initiative with passion, creativity and dedication. It would not have happened without her leadership and commitment. She is dearly missed by the team and the wider membership of the Major Projects Association.

Dr Dicle Kortantamer, Lecturer, University of Leeds

Dr Kate Lawrence, Researcher, University of Leeds

Tamsin Alli-Balogun, Associate Director, AtkinsRéalis

Jenny McLaughlin, Senior Project Manager, Heathrow Airport

Leanne Smith-Perrins, Director, WSP

Luke Irving, Manager, Deloitte LLP

1. Background to the Study

By capturing lessons learned and presenting them in a structured, evidence-informed way, the study set out to provide a valuable foundation for reflection, knowledge exchange and future practice.

In January 2024 the Major Projects Association established a member led network on the topic of Transformation. The purpose of this network is to:

- **Connect & Collaborate:** Foster a vibrant cross sectoral community, connecting transformation professionals across industries and different project types to share experiences and build relationships.
- **Share Knowledge & Best Practices:** Share best practice, lessons learned, and innovative approaches from diverse transformation projects.
- **Research & Insights:** Identify key challenges in transformation and commission studies to generate actionable insights and best practices, furthering the understanding and advancement of the field.

In September 2024 the Association's Studies and Knowledge Committee agreed to fund a study to be undertaken by the Network and the University of Leeds' Centre for Projects, to capture the experience and learning of Association members on how major projects transform. Members bring substantial practical experience, and this study sought to harness and share that expertise through a research-informed lens. By capturing lessons learned and presenting them in a structured, evidence-informed way, the study set out to provide a valuable foundation for reflection, knowledge exchange and future practice.

Following initial roundtables with members of the Association's Transformation Network, the University of Leeds' Centre for Projects led a focus group study with project professionals to examine how transformations of major projects should be led.

Given the broad scope of this topic, the first step was to host roundtable discussions at the Association's Transformation Network event in November 2024, to ensure the study focused on areas which present the greatest improvement opportunities for the profession. These discussions consistently surfaced themes related to leadership, which shaped the direction of the study and became the core focus of the investigation. This focus aligned well with the earlier reports by **National Audit Office** (NAO) and **National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority** (NISTA) on the reset of major projects, offering an opportunity to build on and extend insights provided by them.

2. Executive Summary

Transition: a fundamental change of a project from one state of objectives and / or delivery approach to another.

This study examined how to lead the transition of major projects. To explore this area in greater depth, we conducted a series of focus groups with Association members and their network. While terms like “reset” and “transformation” have been commonly and widely used, there is no one recognised term or definition. Recognising that establishing a clear term is a necessary first step in improving practices, this study introduces and advocates for the broader, more precise term of “transition”, which we have defined as a “A fundamental change of a project from one state of objectives and/or delivery approach to another.” This definition recognises that projects need to continue moving as they change rather than pause and resume. Transition encompasses a reset, referring to the situation where the transition is triggered because of underperformance, and is distinct from a transformation, which refers to a kind of major project that changes its environment. Therefore, transition should be recognised as a legitimate and routine term within major project delivery.

A transition can be planned or unplanned. A typical example of a planned transition is the move from one project phase to another. Unplanned transitions could be triggered by a range of reasons such as a change to the CEO, new legislation or underperformance. Our focus group discussions focused on unplanned transitions, as this is a key area they were keen to learn from, given the limited existing knowledge on it. We found that how to lead a transition is not linked to the kind of event that triggers it, except for the case of underperformance. The focus group discussions highlighted that transitions should be viewed positively, as opportunities for improvement rather than as failures because they offer the possibility to make the project more effective.

We found that in all cases, leading a transition has strong parallels with starting a major project, particularly a major transformation project. It requires core project leadership capabilities, also covered in the Association’s **No More Heroes** report: visioning, sensemaking, relating, and inventing. However, our focus groups also surfaced valuable lessons on how leadership in major projects demands a broader set of capabilities compared to permanent organisations due to the unique time-related demands such as urgency and maintaining momentum. They also revealed how critical it is to complement leadership capabilities with project management capabilities to provide a holistic response, and ground leadership capabilities on democratic leadership values. Nevertheless, the focus group discussions highlighted extensions needed to these capabilities for leading transition of a major project.

This report provides the insights from this study.

3. Setting the scene

a. Key terminology

There is no clear term or definition that refers to the transformation of a major project. Two terms have been used by the Major Projects Association, NAO and NISTA – reset and transformation – with the following definitions:

Definitions	Source of definitions
Transformation: **"a managed change within a Major Project, the outcome of which is unrecognisable from the starting point and cannot be reversed."**	Major Projects Association Transformation Network
Reset: **"to return the project to a deliverable state, it is necessary to bring about fundamental or substantial change to a projects's stated objectives, delivery approach, output, schedule and/or whole life costs."**	Guidance. **IPA Resetting Major Programmes.** Published 4 December 2024
Reset: **"a fundamental or substantial change to what a programme will achieve, or how it is delivered, that cannot be managed through routine change control procedures."**	National Audit Office. **INSIGHT. Lessons learned: Resetting major programmes** Cross-government. SESSION 2022-23. 17 March 2023. HC1198.

Introducing the term ‘transition’

To ensure clarity, we propose using the term “transition”. We suggest defining transition in this context as: “A fundamental change from one state of objectives and/or delivery approach to another.” We interpret objectives as including the iron triangle dimensions of time, cost and quality and compliance with agreed requirements as well as benefits realisation. We interpret delivery approach as including substantial change to requirements and milestones, or the delivery model.

Comparing the term transition with other terms that have been used in the public domain and their key concepts:

- Transformation is usually used in relation to organisational or societal transformation (e.g., major transformational projects transform the organisation or society), whereas transition refers to this happening in a project. So, it is a project specific term we can introduce to our profession.
- The concept of reversal in the Association definition of transformation opens the question of whether a historical organisational or project state can ever be truly reinstated in ever-changing project environments. Our focus group discussions put the emphasis on the leadership work of embedding change to ensure it sticks. In this sense, like any other major transformation project, embedding change is the intent that may or may not be realised.
- Transition is a term that is broader than reset. Reset is only one type of transition – one that is usually considered to be triggered by project performance issues. The term transition recognises that projects need to continue moving as they change rather than pause and resume.
- The definition of transition does not include the concept of speed, unlike the use of the term “second order change” in academic literature. Second order change refers to a change that is of significant magnitude (i.e., radical / paradigmatic shift) and speed, and therefore is different to first order change that is incremental. While the demand for speed was generally agreed by the participants of our focus groups, some participants highlighted that a sense of urgency is usually the case in delivering any major project and is not necessarily special to the transformation of a major project. Therefore, in major projects, which are temporary organisations, the magnitude of change (in terms of a shift from one state to another) appears to be the main characteristic that distinguishes it from continuous change.
- Recently, the **Oxford and Ernst Young report** has brought out the term **turning points**: “Turning points are moments in the transformation process where a transformation has or will go off course and leaders choose to intervene (or not).” The term ‘turning point’ is therefore useful in defining the points for leadership decision making, rather than the situation once the decision is made (to which transition relates), thus the use of a different term is beneficial to retain clarity with respect to these two different leadership situations.

b. Methodology

Focus groups are particularly powerful for exploring topics

Focus Groups (January and March 2025): overview of focus groups

Focus Group (all held online)	No. of Participants	No. of Minutes	No. of Words	No. of Pages
FG01/13th January 2025	4	80	15,180	42
FG02/3rd March 2025	5	100	16,694	46
FG03/6th March 2025	5	114	21,695	51
FG04/13th March 2025	4	95	17,872	41
Totals	**18**	**389**	**71,441**	**180**

The University of Leeds, Leeds Centre for Projects team designed and implemented the focus groups according to recognised scholarly research standards.

We used focus group discussions to explore the specific question of how to lead the transition of a major project. Our focus group discussions were held online in a semi-structured format and consisted of 4–5 participants. Focus groups are particularly powerful for exploring a topic we don't yet understand as the process of sharing and stimulating participant experiences helps gain an in-depth understanding of the topic.

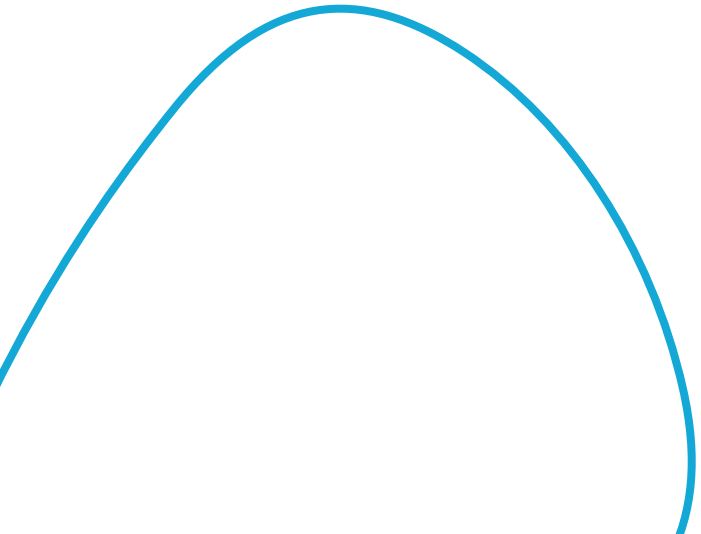
Public/Private Sector	No.	Ratio
Public	4	22%
Private	14	78%
Totals	**18**	**100%**

Industry/Sector	No.	Ratio
Construction and engineering (consulting organisations)	3	17%
Construction and engineering (delivery organisations)	4	22%
Defence and security (delivery organisation)	1	6%
Defence and security (delivery organisation – public sector)	1	6%
Financial and legal (consulting organisations)	2	11%
Financial and legal (delivery organisation – public sector)	1	6%
Transport (consulting organisation)	1	6%
Transport (delivery organisation)	1	6%
Transport (delivery organisations – public sector)	2	11%
Utilities (delivery organisations)	2	11%
Totals	**18**	**100%**

4. Our findings

a. Transition should be viewed as a legitimate domain of professional major project delivery practice

We argue that it is essential that we move beyond the tendency to judge transition as negative or positive to perceiving it more positively.



Performance issues are not the only reason why major projects transition. Transition can also be triggered by critical changes in the environment such as new regulations or technological advancements. Even when the trigger is performance issues, a transition offers the opportunity to enhance the benefits that will be realised or how the project is delivered (e.g., increase resilience).

- The **Oxford and Ernst Young** report highlights that transitions offer an important opportunity, since transformations that successfully navigate turning points are almost twice as likely to over perform against their targets, in their KPIs.
- The **NAO report** also talks about transition as an opportunity: "A programme reset can often be a positive step in response to a need for change. It provides the opportunity to reflect and rebalance a programme.".

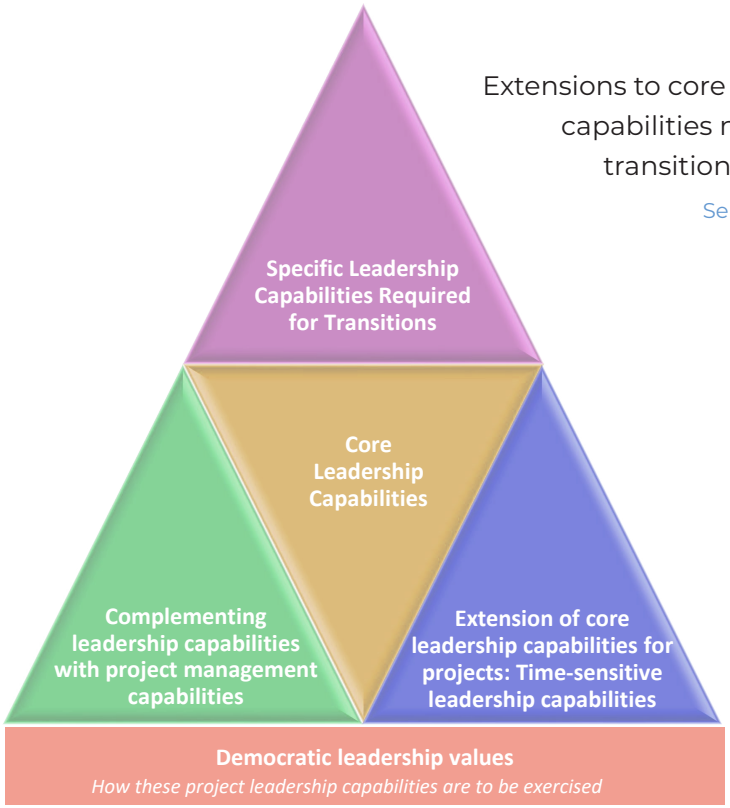
The well-known scholar Albert Hirschman has highlighted that project implementation is a "long voyage of discovery" (Hirschman, 1967, p. 32). This recognition was echoed by one of the participants in the study:

> ***'...we should all have enough experience now to understand the shocks, and changes happen, right? So, it's not like these should be things that have completely come out of blue. Things will come along. It's how the project then reacts and how the leadership is... we should be able to, with experience say, "these things will happen, how are we going to respond to them to make sure that we still deliver our outcomes?".'***

We argue that shifting the mindset in the project management profession to perceive transition more positively is an enabling condition for better transitional leadership and therefore better outcomes. This is because we can begin to see transition as a legitimate domain of professional major project delivery practice, which will help align collective focus on the actions and capabilities required to make meaningful progress. Shifting the mindset in this way encourages adaptation and growth rather than fear of blame during transition.

b. Transitions largely require the same leadership and project management capabilities needed in major projects, but also some additional ones

There will never be a single "correct" approach to managing major project transitions.



Extensions to core project leadership capabilities needs for leading a transition of a major project

Select white text label for more details

Our findings highlight that leading the transition of a project has strong parallels with starting a major project, particularly a major transformation project. They suggest that we need to extend common understandings of the capabilities needed to lead the start of major projects, and complement them with some capabilities specific to the transition of major projects.

It is important to note that just as there is "No such thing as .. a 'one best way' to manage organisational change" (**Burnes, 1996**), there will also never be a single 'correct' approach to managing major project transitions. Further, our findings suggest that the demand for leadership and project management capabilities is not linked to the nature of the trigger which begins the transition, except for performance assessments linked to cost or time overrun. Instead, the demand is driven by a transition situation which has one or more of the following characteristics (also highlighted in blue in table 1):

- High levels of uncertainty (including lack of clarity)
- High diversity of interests (individual/group/organisational), and diverse organisations
- Needing to change ways of working/culture, and demand for additional capacity / investment
- Time-related concerns (demand for speed, immediate/rapid response, momentum, lack of time).

Table 1: Overview of our findings

Core Leadership Capabilities	Insights from the previous reports about leadership capabilities that are required in major projects and how our study extends them	Extension of core leadership capabilities for projects: Time-sensitive leadership capabilities	Complementing leadership capabilities with project management capabilities	Specific Leadership Capabilities Required for Transitions
Visioning: This capability is about creating and communicating credible and compelling goals (i.e., setting the direction).	The 'No More Heroes' report emphasises having a compelling vision, and the NAO report suggests the need for a ***clear vision.*** In addition, our findings suggest that it is crucial to ***make the vision credible*** **under conditions of uncertainty, diverse organisational interests** and in the face of the danger of embarking on trends and buzzwords without clear logic to support them. This involves creating shared objectives, clarifying competing interests (e.g., shareholder-driven organisations/public organisations), recognising the different pressures diverse stakeholders create, and having open communication about "what's in it for me?" for everyone **to be able to do things at speed**. It may also involve moving people out of the team if they are not getting behind the new direction. **When the transition is linked to performance assessments**, credibility is likely to be strongly linked to prioritising the dimension of the iron triangle that overran (time, cost or alignment with quality requirements or benefits).	**Maintaining momentum** in the face of uncertainty: Making ***early decisions*** (not being frozen when a decision is difficult) to provide direction and clarity. Decisions will need to be made to keep the project moving, even if there is not enough information available to assess what is optimal, and to proactively prepare for potential consequences. By contrast, judgement is also needed in not ***jumping in too quickly*** ("going slow to go fast") – balancing demand for momentum with enough consultation to make an informed decision and ***preventing de-acceleration*** by ensuring everyone knows what they are doing and why they should be doing it. There is also the need to recognise the **mismatch between pace of change** mandated and governance processes. One of the suggestions made is therefore to ***brief key decision makers before the governance forum*** to enable them to make a decision at the governance forum (the NAO report *Delivering Programmes at Speed* can provide further ideas).	***Scope management, piloting and governance*** in creating the goal under conditions of **uncertainty**. Governance and scope management are key areas of focus highlighted in the NAO and IPA reports. Our findings suggest the need to pay special attention to these in defining the transition goal, locking the scope down as early as possible and piloting to reduce uncertainty with respect to goals. ***Applying lessons learnt*** from the transition process, in a continuous and iterative way. The IPA report highlights the importance of lessons learnt, our findings reiterate the importance of doing this at the start and doing it regularly (not only at the end). We also identified that focusing on both positive and negative experiences, and developing networks for learning across projects (e.g., incentives to share learning, communities of practice to get support) are useful in enabling root cause analysis to be done **faster and effectively**.	***Leadership capability – Navigating time-related issues*** requires more focus, particularly when needing to dive in without having answers and preparing for the consequences of doing this.

Core Leadership Capabilities	Insights from the previous reports about leadership capabilities that are required in major projects and how our study extends them	Extension of core leadership capabilities for projects: Time-sensitive leadership capabilities	Complementing leadership capabilities with project management capabilities	Specific Leadership Capabilities Required for Transitions
Sensemaking: This capability is about understanding the context you are operating in (understanding root causes of issues, culture, people).	The NAO and IPA reports draw attention to the importance of ***understanding the root cause of the issues***. The 'no more heroes' report puts the emphasis on sensing of the context and people ***by the individual leader***. In addition to these, our findings emphasise the ***importance of doing this collaboratively*** to get a holistic understanding and ensure ownership of the problem and its solution across **diverse organisational members**. When the **transition is linked to performance assessments**, there tend to be reputational concerns, possibly driving adversarial / tribal behaviour (e.g., blaming and backstabbing). Collaborative investigation of the root cause helps moves beyond blaming or narrowly focusing on one part.	***Using deadlines as focusing devices*** like an upcoming gate or milestones can help the team maintain rates of progress when the **transition is linked to performance assessments**.	Our findings do not highlight any specific complementary project management capabilities to support sensemaking, but we suggest that using established tools such as PESTLE analysis could be useful.	***Leadership capability – Sensemaking needs to be supplemented with sensegiving:*** Changing the mindset of the team from delivery to transformation, and telling the compelling story of why there is need for more investment or people. ***Complementary project management capability – Resourcing & governance:*** Whilst these are also highlighted in the NAO report, our findings particularly highlight creating capacity by taking decisions around stopping, starting or continuing work, or asking for more investment/resources, and eliminating the fear of going first if there is a need to invest more by getting key stakeholder agreement. However the NAO report from the Crossrail project learning cautions that securing more project staff can take time where there is a limited number of people with skills needed.
Relating: This capability is about: • inquiring – listening with intent to others, • advocating – explaining your point of view, • connecting – cultivating a network to respond to challenges and opportunities	The 'no more heroes' report directs attention to ***humility and emotional intelligence***, and the NAO report points out the importance of ***providing clarity on why the change is needed, promoting right behaviours and ensuring the wellbeing of the project team*** by referencing the MoD report on psychological safety.	***Coping with demands for speed:*** Creating fast decision-making mechanism by **connecting individuals across organisations at each level**, communicating with **immediacy when there is no clarity** (presenting a holding statement), building psychological safety to have honest feedback about how it is going, despite **pressure and demand for speed**.	***Team building*** is also captured in the IPA report. Our findings highlight the importance of creating one team from **diverse organisations** by integrating process and technology to prevent silos but also clarifying when to collaborate or not, having the maturity and the organisational structure (e.g., strong client, capable supply chain) to deal with multiple interfaces.	***Leadership capability – Navigating time-related issues*** requires more focus, particularly with respect to understanding the implications of timing and understanding the sentiment of others ie. how different stakeholders feel about pace.

Core Leadership Capabilities	Insights from the previous reports about leadership capabilities that are required in major projects and how our study extends them	Extension of core leadership capabilities for projects: Time-sensitive leadership capabilities	Complementing leadership capabilities with project management capabilities	Specific Leadership Capabilities Required for Transitions
Relating: This capability is about: • inquiring – listening with intent to others, • advocating – explaining your point of view, • connecting – cultivating a network to respond to challenges and opportunities	Our findings extend these insights by highlighting a broader set of concerns with respect to ***emotions, and communication***: • using the emotional attachment to the project purpose as an anchor that remains constant even if the objectives change, tying **outcomes to personal and organisational interests/goals** to get buy into the change, providing clarity by role modelling positive behaviours (distributing leadership to do this effectively), ethos and values to maintain trust in the face of **diverse and evolving organisational interests** (e.g., bidding for future work whilst doing the project collaboratively may prompt self-interest, and erode trust amongst parties) • acknowledging what is working and asking for more of it, challenging the senior managers on decisions when needed, developing supporting mechanisms rather than trying to make everyone happy, honest, open and consistent communication, and communicating first to people affected, in **changing ways of working.** • Also openly communicating weaknesses with humility and the need for acknowledging emotions such as grief, and ensuring collectively ownership of the problem resolution **when the transition is linked to performance assessments**.	***Linking to the permanent organisation***: not forgetting that leaders in the **diverse permanent organisations** may have a different level of trust to the project team. ***Planning for phasing change*** to be able to demonstrate progress and gain confidence and to develop maturity in the **new ways of working**. The IPA report also emphasises the need to have a phased approach to the transition. Our focus group findings suggest that even the delivery phase (Phase 3) itself would benefit from a phased approach to support the relating leadership capability required to build trust and confidence. At the same time, considering the changes to leadership across different phases. **When the transition is linked to performance assessments** also considering when changes to players and accountabilities are needed, and in transition leaders not solely relying on their past experience of transition but also ensuring a balanced diversity of thought as supporting mechanism.	Also, considering co-locating physically if there is **high level of uncertainty to rapidly build trust and change course as needed**. Our findings also suggest that it is crucial to rehearse/establish teamwork early in the project to be able to **capitalise on it quickly** during a transition to maintain/repair trust, respect and confidence, but also recognising that fresh team building may be required to give the "battle-weary" team members and new ones the opportunity to get to know each other so they can work as one team. ***Resourcing*** Making an change in the leadership team to retain subject knowledge and lessons learnt, but also bring fresh views in **when the transition is linked to performance assessments.** Also, both IPA and NAO highlight the need for identifying and recruiting the people needed to deliver the transition. Our findings suggest that **when the transition is linked to performance assessments**, the existing workforce may not welcome this recruitment, and therefore this capability needs to be supported by relating leadership capability that is sensitive to emotional responses that emerge. ***Governance:*** Like the NAO report, our findings suggest the importance of ensuring accountability for fixing and moving things through governance, but also the need for the sponsor to empower people to remove blockages and the delegated authority to make change within the boundaries of this authority to **maintain momentum.**	***Complementary project management capability – Contracting:*** Our findings support the NAO report's suggestion that the potential need for a transition is considered when agreeing a contract. In our focus groups, attention was directed to how contracting is crucial for relating leadership capability as it ensures commercial 'skin in the game' and ensures the contractual incentives which will drive the right transition behaviour and commitments. It is important to regularly review the risk dynamics in relation to contractual relationships and make changes as needed to ensure effective ownership and management of risk.

Core Leadership Capabilities	Insights from the previous reports about leadership capabilities that are required in major projects and how our study extends them	Extension of core leadership capabilities for projects: Time-sensitive leadership capabilities	Complementing leadership capabilities with project management capabilities	Specific Leadership Capabilities Required for Transitions
Inventing This capability is about creating new ways of achieving the vision.	The 'no more heroes' report emphasises ***creating new ways of working***, which is also echoed by the discussion of new delivery approaches (for example, changes in commercial strategies, governance structures and leadership teams) in the NAO and IPA reports. In addition to these points, our findings put the emphasis on ***collaborative creativity and innovation***, particularly the importance of creating space of creativity and innovation to co-create **new ways of working** (better and faster ways of working), bringing in an outside view from a delivery partner to question **ways of working**, potentially choosing to move away from industry or organisational processes that are not working, and creating safety nets to enable team to 'fail small' as the team attempts new ways of working in the face of **uncertainty**.	***Prioritising creativity and innovation:*** Carving out a little time for creativity and innovation is important **even when the leader feels they do not have the time for it**. Our findings do not provide explanations of how, but we suggest design-thinking approaches, such as organising gamification workshops.	***Planning, governance and piloting*** for changing ways of working/culture and embedding this change. The NAO report also mentions the need to ensure the right culture exists beyond a transition. While here the focus is on preventing another transition or improving early warning mechanisms, our findings draw the attention to the **new ways of working** that need to be piloted as potential avenues to 'fail small'.	***Complementary project management capability – Resourcing***: Our findings suggest the importance of upskilling the resources on the project (e.g., training them as coaches) so that they can better support creating new ways of working.

The concept of democratic leadership as potentially underpinning the leadership capabilities.

Although our research did not directly investigate leadership values, our findings highlight their underlying importance in exercising leadership.

We encountered a diverse range of values amongst leaders and project delivery organisations/ partnerships. These values collectively suggest that the **democratic leadership** style underpins the capabilities outlined in **Table 1**.

Democratic leadership is built on the following principles:

- Encourage and support people in aspiring to desirable values (e.g., wellbeing, fairness), and exercise and facilitate deliberation to resolve differences between values
- Create an environment in which people are active contributors to the creation of the culture and relationships
- Activate accountability processes – making or influencing decisions as an accountable post-holder (acting as a leader), everyone actively contributing to participatory forums
- Ensure an environment in which people are empowered to participate and learn
- Celebrate respect and diversity.

And are supported by these communicative virtues:

- Honesty and transparency
- Clarity
- Preparedness to express a view
- Tolerance and patience
- Willingness to take criticism and re-examine assumptions
- Self-control.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research participants, for taking the time to talk about their experiences of the transition of major projects and the support of the Major Project Association's Rapporteur team in the realisation of this report.

References

Guidance. IPA Resetting Major Programmes. Infrastructure and Projects Authority. Published 4 December 2024

INSIGHT Lessons learned: Resetting major programmes. National Audit Office (NAO) Cross-government. SESSION 2022-23. 17 MARCH 2023. HC 1198

Morgan, David L. ***The Focus Group Guidebook***, SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 1997

No More Heroes. A Major Projects Association Study Report on leadership capability. Major Projects Association © Major Projects Association 2023

Transformation leadership: Navigating turning points. Saïd Business School University of Oxford and Ernst & Young (EYG no. 003279-24Gbl)
© 2024 SAID BUSINESS SCHOOL

Major Projects Association

Leading Major Project Transitions: Introducing an Extended Model of Leadership Capabilities and Skills



MAJOR PROJECTS ASSOCIATION

© Major Projects Association

Appendix

Insights from the previous reports about leadership capabilities that are required in major projects and how our study extends them

visioning

The 'No More Heroes' report emphasises having a compelling vision, and the NAO report suggests the need for a ***clear vision.***

In addition, our findings suggest that it is crucial to ***make the vision credible*** **under conditions of uncertainty, diverse organisational interests** and in the face of the danger of embarking on trends and buzzwords without clear logic to support them. This involves creating shared objectives, clarifying competing interests (e.g., shareholder-driven organisations/public organisations), recognising the different pressures diverse stakeholders create, and having open communication about "what's in it for me?" for everyone **to be able to do things at speed**. It may also involve moving people out of the team if they are not getting behind the new direction.

sense making

When the transition is linked to performance assessments, credibility is likely to be strongly linked to prioritising the dimension of the iron triangle that overran (time, cost or alignment with quality requirements or benefits).

The NAO and IPA reports draw attention to the importance of ***understanding the root cause of the issues***. The 'no more heroes' report puts the emphasis on sensing of the context and people ***by the individual leader***. In addition to these, our findings emphasise the ***importance of doing this collaboratively*** to get a holistic understanding and ensure ownership of the problem and its solution across **diverse organisational members**. When the **transition is linked to performance assessments**, there tend to be reputational concerns, possibly driving adversarial / tribal behaviour (e.g., blaming and backstabbing). Collaborative investigation of the root cause helps moves beyond blaming or narrowly focusing on one part.

relating

The 'no more heroes' report directs attention to ***humility and emotional intelligence***, and the NAO report points out the importance of ***providing clarity on why the change is needed, promoting right behaviours and ensuring the wellbeing of the project team*** by referencing the MoD report on psychological safety.

Our findings extend these insights by highlighting a broader set of concerns with respect to ***emotions, and communication***:

- using the emotional attachment to the project purpose as an anchor that remains constant even if the objectives change, tying **outcomes to personal and organisational interests/goals** to get buy into the change, providing clarity by role modelling positive behaviours (distributing leadership to do this effectively), ethos and values to maintain trust in the face of **diverse and evolving organisational interests** (e.g., bidding for future work whilst doing the project collaboratively may prompt self-interest, and erode trust amongst parties)
- acknowledging what is working and asking for more of it, challenging the senior managers on decisions when needed, developing supporting mechanisms rather than trying to make everyone happy, honest, open and consistent communication, and communicating first to people affected, in **changing ways of working.**
- Also openly communicating weaknesses with humility and the need for acknowledging emotions such as grief, and ensuring collectively ownership of the problem resolution **when the transition is linked to performance assessments**.

inventing

The 'no more heroes' report emphasises ***creating new ways of working***, which is also echoed by the discussion of new delivery approaches (for example, changes in commercial strategies, governance structures and leadership teams) in the NAO and IPA reports. In addition to these points, our findings put the emphasis on ***collaborative creativity and innovation***, particularly the importance of creating space of creativity and innovation to co-create **new ways of working** (better and faster ways of working), bringing in an outside view from a delivery partner to question **ways of working**, potentially choosing to move away from industry or organisational processes that are not working, and creating safety nets to enable team to 'fail small' as the team attempts new ways of working in the face of **uncertainty**.

<< back

Extension of core leadership capabilities for projects: Time-sensitive leadership capabilities

visioning

Maintaining momentum in the face of uncertainty: Making ***early decisions*** (not being frozen when a decision is difficult) to provide direction and clarity. Decisions will need to be made to keep the project moving, even if there is not enough information available to assess what is optimal, and to proactively prepare for potential consequences.

By contrast, judgement is also needed in not ***jumping in too quickly*** ("going slow to go fast") – balancing demand for momentum with enough consultation to make an informed decision and ***preventing de-acceleration*** by ensuring everyone knows what they are doing and why they should be doing it.

sense making

There is also the need to recognise the **mismatch between pace of change** mandated and governance processes. One of the suggestions made is therefore to ***brief key decision makers before the governance forum*** to enable them to make a decision at the governance forum (the NAO report *Delivering Programmes at Speed* can provide further ideas).

relating

Using deadlines as focusing devices like an upcoming gate or milestones can help the team maintain rates of progress when the **transition is linked to performance assessments**.

Coping with demands for speed: Creating fast decision-making mechanism by **connecting individuals across organisations at each level**, communicating with **immediacy when there is no clarity** (presenting a holding statement), building psychological safety to have honest feedback about how it is going, despite **pressure and demand for speed**.

inventing

Linking to the permanent organisation: not forgetting that leaders in the **diverse permanent organisations** may have a different level of trust to the project team. ***Planning for phasing change*** to be able to demonstrate progress and gain confidence and to develop maturity in the **new ways of working**. The IPA report also emphasises the need to have a phased approach to the transition. Our focus group findings suggest that even the delivery phase (Phase 3) itself would benefit from a phased approach to support the relating leadership capability required to build trust and confidence. At the same time, considering the changes to leadership across different phases. **When the transition is linked to performance assessments** also considering when changes to players and accountabilities are needed, and in transition leaders not solely relying on their past experience of transition but also ensuring a balanced diversity of thought as supporting mechanism.

Prioritising creativity and innovation: Carving out a little time for creativity and innovation is important **even when the leader feels they do not have the time for it**. Our findings do not provide explanations of how, but we suggest design-thinking approaches, such as organising gamification workshops.

<< back

Complementing leadership capabilities with project management capabilities

visioning

Scope management, piloting and governance in creating the goal under conditions of **uncertainty**. Governance and scope management are key areas of focus highlighted in the NAO and IPA reports. Our findings suggest the need to pay special attention to these in defining the transition goal, locking the scope down as early as possible and piloting to reduce uncertainty with respect to goals.

Applying lessons learnt from the transition process, in a continuous and iterative way. The IPA report highlights the importance of lessons learnt, our findings reiterate the importance of doing this at the start and doing it regularly (not only at the end). We also identified that focusing on both positive and negative experiences, and developing networks for learning across projects (e.g., incentives to share learning, communities of practice to get support) are useful in enabling root cause analysis to be done **faster and effectively**.

sense making

Our findings do not highlight any specific complementary project management capabilities to support sensemaking, but we suggest that using established tools such as PESTLE analysis could be useful.

relating

Team building is also captured in the IPA report. Our findings highlight the importance of creating one team from **diverse organisations** by integrating process and technology to prevent silos but also clarifying when to collaborate or not, having the maturity and the organisational structure (e.g., strong client, capable supply chain) to deal with multiple interfaces.

Also, considering co-locating physically if there is **high level of uncertainty to rapidly build trust and change course as needed**.

Our findings also suggest that it is crucial to rehearse/establish teamwork early in the project to be able to **capitalise on it quickly** during a transition to maintain/repair trust, respect and confidence, but also recognising that fresh team building may be required to give the “battle-weary” team members and new ones the opportunity to get to know each other so they can work as one team.

Resourcing Making an change in the leadership team to retain subject knowledge and lessons learnt, but also bring fresh views in **when the transition is linked to performance assessments.** Also, both IPA and NAO highlight the need for identifying and recruiting the people needed to deliver the transition. Our findings suggest that **when the transition is linked to performance assessments**, the existing workforce may not welcome this recruitment, and therefore this capability needs to be supported by relating leadership capability that is sensitive to emotional responses that emerge.

Governance: Like the NAO report, our findings suggest the importance of ensuring accountability for fixing and moving things through governance, but also the need for the sponsor to empower people to remove blockages and the delegated authority to make change within the boundaries of this authority to **maintain momentum.**

inventing

Planning, governance and piloting for changing ways of working/culture and embedding this change. The NAO report also mentions the need to ensure the right culture exists beyond a transition. While here the focus is on preventing another transition or improving early warning mechanisms, our findings draw the attention to the **new ways of working** that need to be piloted as potential avenues to ‘fail small’.

<< back

Specific Leadership Capabilities Required for Transitions

visioning

Leadership capability – Navigating time-related issues requires more focus, particularly when needing to dive in without having answers and preparing for the consequences of doing this.

Leadership capability – Sensemaking needs to be supplemented with sensegiving: Changing the mindset of the team from delivery to transformation, and telling the compelling story of why there is need for more investment or people.

sense making

Complementary project management capability – Resourcing & governance: Whilst these are also highlighted in the NAO report, our findings particularly highlight creating capacity by taking decisions around stopping, starting or continuing work, or asking for more investment/resources, and eliminating the fear of going first if there is a need to invest more by getting key stakeholder agreement. However the NAO report from the Crossrail project learning cautions that securing more project staff can take time where there is a limited number of people with skills needed.

relating

Leadership capability – Navigating time-related issues requires more focus, particularly with respect to understanding the implications of timing and understanding the sentiment of others ie. how different stakeholders feel about pace.

Complementary project management capability – Contracting: Our findings support the NAO report's suggestion that the potential need for a transition is considered when agreeing a contract. In our focus groups, attention was directed to how contracting is crucial for relating leadership capability as it ensures commercial 'skin in the game' and ensures the contractual incentives which will drive the right transition behaviour and commitments. It is important to regularly review the risk dynamics in relation to contractual relationships and make changes as needed to ensure effective ownership and management of risk.

inventing

Complementary project management capability – Resourcing: Our findings suggest the importance of upskilling the resources on the project (e.g., training them as coaches) so that they can better support creating new ways of working.

<< back

The concept of democratic leadership as potentially underpinning the leadership capabilities.

Although our research did not directly investigate leadership values, our findings highlight their underlying importance in exercising leadership.

We encountered a diverse range of values amongst leaders and project delivery organisations/ partnerships. These values collectively suggest that the **democratic leadership** style underpins the capabilities outlined in **Table 1**.

Democratic leadership is built on the following principles:

- Encourage and support people in aspiring to desirable values (e.g., wellbeing, fairness), and exercise and facilitate deliberation to resolve differences between values
- Create an environment in which people are active contributors to the creation of the culture and relationships
- Activate accountability processes – making or influencing decisions as an accountable post-holder (acting as a leader), everyone actively contributing to participatory forums
- Ensure an environment in which people are empowered to participate and learn
- Celebrate respect and diversity.

And are supported by these communicative virtues:

- Honesty and transparency
- Clarity
- Preparedness to express a view
- Tolerance and patience
- Willingness to take criticism and re-examine assumptions
- Self-control.

<< back