

THE STRESS OF LEADERSHIP

Highlights from the Major Projects Association event
held on 15th May 2014

The role of a project director is a demanding one, and an ability to cope with high levels of stress is one of many job requirements. High standards are set, for themselves and their team, and there is an inclination to take on more work than is physically possible. Coupled to this, financial drivers leading to a decreasing resource pool, and the acknowledgement that there are certain points in the project life cycle that are inherently stressful both increase the pressure on project leaders.

Therefore it is hardly surprising that these project leaders are ever mindful of the likelihood and associated risks of project failure.

STRESS AND THE PROJECT DIRECTOR

Working in a project environment tends to attract individuals who are comfortable with pressure. Projects have distinct patterns of intense activity and are temporary endeavours, requiring the participants to 'move on' and adapt to constant change. Project people expect a certain degree of stress and challenge and thrive on this, but there is a 'mean tolerance threshold' and it is not sustainable to exceed this for long periods. Leaders are expected to be confident, but sometimes there is confusion around those who exhibit a high degree of self-assurance. Occasionally **overconfidence is mistaken for great leadership.**

Project directors are frequently solitary individuals with a 'trailing spouse' who has followed them to some far-flung location and is struggling to adapt to cultural differences, often adding personal stress to the equation.

In most project environments, collaboration across the supplier eco-system is seen as a good approach to reduce transactional stress, as was seen at the **Major Project Association seminar on collaborative working** in March 2013.

'In the context of this debate about stress and leadership it is the human factors which are most difficult.'

Air Vice-Marshal Elaine West CBE, Director of Projects, Defence Infrastructure Organisation

'Any idiot can face a crisis. It is the day-to-day living that wears you out.'

Anton Chekhov

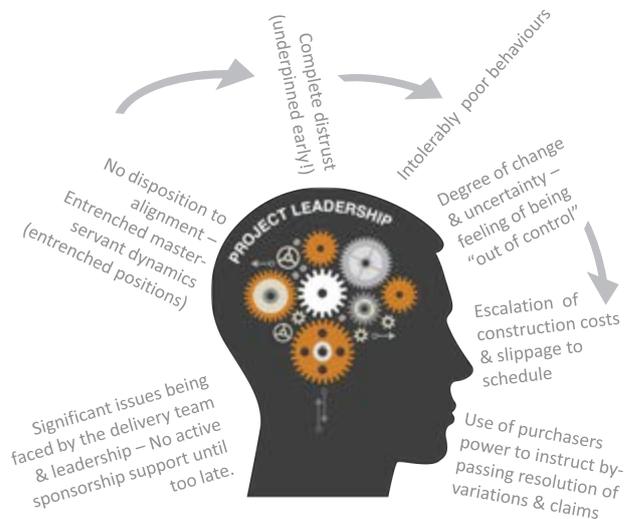
A project director's story

One of the participants gave an example: their particular project was transactional, as opposed to collaborative, and required the ability to manage potentially adversarial contracting behaviour. They worked within a culture for which shouting and banging the table for emphasis was seen as normal.

This situation went on for many months, and it was difficult for them to summon up the necessary enthusiasm to turn up for work every day, at one point stopping the car on the drive into work and reflecting on whether or not to continue. In the end, they asked to be removed from the project.

However, the stress that they experienced did not end at this point. Their high personal expectations resulted in months of self-reproach and injured pride.

Why was this a BAD project experience?



PROJECT LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES

A key area of responsibility for project leaders is dealing quickly and efficiently with any instances of bullying and aggressive behaviour. Project directors need to have a good knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses, so that they can foster a 'culture of understanding' and work with HR and their team leaders to support those team members who are showing signs of stress. The most critical thing to do to facilitate better emotional intelligence is to focus on **listening** to the stakeholders of a project, rather than dictating the way things are going to be.

There are also responsibilities in the areas of hiring staff, and engaging supplier partners, if only because mistakes could potentially lead to critical incidents. Are the people coming onto the project doing so because they are the best fit, or because they are the cheapest? Ensuring that slack is built into project schedules will help to mitigate against the risk that on-boarding processes are rushed and suboptimal.

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO ABOUT STRESS?

- Know when to intervene to assist a project manager in a potentially stressful situation – this can be difficult to identify as an individual's ability to deal with pressure varies, and assistance can often be rebuffed if it is offered too early.
- Follow up with an ongoing focus on a culture of understanding, with appropriate values being reinforced regularly and often.
- Implement training programmes to recognise the signs of stress.
- Introduce a comprehensive employee assistance programme that includes support for staff and their families who have been affected by stress.
- Be patient and give the time needed for stress-affected individuals to rebuild their self-esteem.

Very often in a project environment the focus is on the technical elements, and yet it is typically the human factors which make a difference to the overall stress levels of the project team. It has often been said that **'Success is soft people skills'** – and it is certainly true that project directors benefit from belonging to a community of practice in which individuals at a similar level of seniority can share experiences and insights in a secure environment. As the saying goes: *'It isn't the mountain ahead that wears you out; it's the grain of sand in your shoe.'* Anon

TYPICAL INDICATORS OF STRESS:

- Dramatic behavioural change – someone typically loud becomes very quiet
- Loss of motivation
- Working longer hours
- Sickness absence
- Weight loss or gain
- Uncharacteristic errors or poor performance
- Increased reliance on alcohol, tobacco or drugs

'How much permission do you give yourselves for a real work/life balance? Have you taken your holidays this year? Are you going to take your holidays this year?'

Kate Nowlan, Chief Executive Officer, CiC Employee Assistance

POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. If the project set-up is collaborative, does this necessarily mean that the project will have a less stressful environment?
2. What approaches can be used to challenge intolerable behaviour?
3. What self-awareness techniques can be used to monitor your own level of stress?
4. Does an increasingly 'wired' world detract from the importance of personal interaction and increase stress?

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