

Project Comment

Being Right Doesn't Count for Much...

Successful delivery of today's highly inter-dependent projects is about relationships more than process, argues David Archer, specialist in leadership and change management and advisory board member of Westminster Business School.

“

Sometimes the most important lessons are the easiest to state but the hardest to learn. Thirty years ago I was just starting my first job as a graduate engineer at what was then the biggest chemical works in Europe at ICI on Teesside. Armed with all the latest control engineering techniques I was sure I could improve the operation of most of the distillation columns on site, which to my young eyes clearly weren't running at optimal performance. Was my enthusiastic advice met with open arms? Er...no. I was told in no uncertain terms what I could do with all my charts and figures. Eventually a kindly shift supervisor took me to one side and said, "What you graduates need to remember is that being right doesn't count for much here on site".

I was shocked. I knew my calculations were right. But it took me several months and many long conversations with experienced operators to understand just how well they knew that plant. And gradually I came to understand exactly why you might not want to run a column at maximum efficiency if that would reduce its reliability - or why you might not want to operate a process flat out just before a changeover.

I reflected on my own ability to learn that same lesson just recently, when I took charge of preparing a large family meal over the Christmas

Three critical skills for collaborative leadership and successful project delivery

- Influencing** the ability to match the most effective method of influence to the needs of the situation and the parties involved.
- Engagement** building relationships across organisational boundaries, communicating with clarity and involving others in decision making.
- Mediation** the ability to address conflict situations as soon as they arise - building the confidence of others in the process.

Three essential attitudes that collaborative project leaders need to possess

- Agility** assimilating facts quickly, asking incisive questions, finding new options, and handling complexity with ease.
- Patience** taking a calm and measured approach in a crisis, reflecting on new information and giving confidence to others.
- Empathy** genuinely listening, understanding personal impact and taking an open-minded attitude to the views and opinions of others.

Originally published in chapter 7 of Collaborative Leadership: Building Relationships, Handling Conflict, Sharing Control - by D Archer, A Cameron - Routledge 2013

“In today’s highly interdependent delivery environments the big challenge for many Project Managers is that they need to share control – with partners, contractors, or even government regulators”

period. Armed now with many years of experience I did what any self-respecting Project Manager would do. I broke the menu down into simple steps, drew up a timetable, allocated tasks to family members (starting with the youngest and least likely to complain), and sat back with a glass of mulled wine, happy that my job was well in hand. If I needed a timely reminder of that 30 year old lesson, the unfortunate result of this dinner-related endeavour was it. Your analysis, solution design, resource allocation and scheduling might be world class - but unless you can take people with you, you won’t get the turkey cooked on time!

The Rise of Collaboration: Why it Matters to Project Managers

Over the course of the last 12 years my colleague Alex Cameron and I have specifically studied how leaders encourage collaboration and discretionary effort in situations where numerous different organisations have to work together to deliver results. In that time a number of things have become obvious: first, what 12 years ago seemed a rather peripheral area of work has now become mainstream, secondly the nature of the collaboration is becoming more complex and more project critical, and thirdly (and rather sadly) many Project Managers seem to struggle with the challenges of collaborative project leadership.

Perhaps this is not so surprising. Looking at most project management training courses, and indeed the latest edition of the Body of Knowledge (BOK), the emphasis

is still on mechanisms of control. Whether it be in terms of the classic Time, Cost, Quality triangle or managing the six aspects of projects in the BOK (scope, schedule, finance, risk, quality, resources) the Project Manager is still taught about systems that enable them to be in control of their project. But in today’s highly-interdependent delivery environments the big challenge for many Project Managers is that they need to **share control** – with partners, contractors, or even government regulators. And in a situation of shared control, you’ve guessed it... Being right doesn’t count for much!

New Skills for Old Problems

So what does it take to be able to share control, to build trust in your delivery partners and to enable them to build trust in you? Well fundamentally it means being able to stand in the shoes of your partners and understand their objectives, their pressures and what motivates them – even if these things are very different from your own. A colleague of mine put it much more graphically when she said “it’s not just standing in your partner’s shoes it’s running a marathon in them and knowing precisely where they are going to give you blisters”.

So what are the skills and attitudes required in leaders to enable them to deliver projects in collaborative environments? My own research has identified three critical skills and three essential attitudes that I believe Project Managers and their employers need to incorporate alongside the traditional elements of project control when planning development programmes.



BS11000 – Necessary But Not Sufficient

Of course I'm not the first person to have noticed the rise of collaboration and the need for organisations/ individuals to respond to this trend. In recent years many large contractors and their clients have gone down the route of BS11000 certification as a mechanism to manage collaborative project delivery relationships more effectively. There is much good practice in BS11000, but essentially it is a process based approach to tackling a relationship based problem and that can only go so far. In my opinion, systems and approved paperwork count for very little when a relationship turns sour and a project starts going off the rails. At that point what you need are Project Managers who can pick up the phone and call their opposite number, knowing that their call will be answered and their views will be listened to with genuine understanding. Having the right procedures in place for collaborative project delivery is a necessary foundation but it's not sufficient to ensure success.

Collaboration is always a voluntary activity. You may be able to enforce basic compliance but you can't mandate active collaboration. At the end of the day, on complex interdependent projects, the people you count on for

successful delivery have to want you to succeed in your role as much as you want them to succeed in theirs. Getting to that point relies on Project Managers being able to develop relationships across organisational boundaries.

So my simply stated lesson for 2014 builds on the one I started with 30 years ago. It's precisely because being right doesn't count for much that Project Managers need to learn to make friends – and to do so before they actually need to call on them. In my view and experience, this is what will deliver successful projects in today's highly interdependent environment.



“There is much good practice in BS11000, but essentially it is a process based approach to tackling a relationship based problem and that can only go so far. In my opinion, systems and approved paperwork count for very little when a relationship turns sour and a project starts going off the rails.”

About the Author

*David Archer is a Director of Socia Ltd a company specialising in advising leaders and their Boards on managing critical business relationships. He runs leadership programmes at Ashridge and Warwick Business Schools and with Alex Cameron he is co-author of **Collaborative Leadership – Building relationships, handling conflict and sharing control** (Routledge, March 2013).*