What Organisation Leaders Can Learn from Project Management

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I often run **project management training sessions and workshops** for people who manage projects. Many of them aren't *career project managers* and don't even have the words *project manager* in their title. They are hired into an operations or business function and one of the many roles they have is to run projects in parallel with their BAU work.

All employees need to be skilled at implementing change

Teaching project management to these types of employees is becoming increasingly popular. Fewer and fewer people have roles that are restricted to doing the same activity day after day – be it selling, processing, building, organizing or marketing.

Change is happening in all corners of a business and employees need to be equipped to lead projects irrespective of their role, industry or level of seniority.

Take finance as an example.

Most of the employees who work in the finance department will be tasked with routine jobs such as running payroll, approving new vendors, processing expenses and chasing debtors.

But they will also be involved in improving how the department and the company does business by making positive changes to the payments system, general ledger and inter-departmental workflows.

It does of course happen that external experts are hired in to help with these changes, but there will always be a need for someone inside the company to work with them – right from the most junior to the most senior person in the department.

Surprisingly, project management isn't boring

To teach staff about how to implement change, I typically run workshops that combine people skills and the more traditional project management skills.

During the training I get the attendees to define and plan a project so that when they leave the workshop they will have used every single tool inside the classroom first. We also analyze stakeholders, talk about human behavior and explore how to create a high performing team.

Many employees perceive project management as a boring discipline, but after the training they realize that is it an essential – and often simple – skill that has the potential to addresses all of their pain points, from poorly defined scope and deliverables to unclear roles and responsibilities, lack of buy-in and over-optimistic scheduling.

Far from the dull and boring image they had in their minds, they have become excited about a framework and a set of tools that can help them to better collaborate and engage the team to deliver real benefits to their client.

Senior leaders need project management training too

But most telling, perhaps, is a common remark from the attendees that they wish their managers had attended the training too.

The drive to improve project delivery in organizations won't happen solely by training those who work on the team – and more and more companies are beginning to recognize that.

To succeed we have to persuade organizational leaders and heads of departments that they too are instrumental to making change happen and that they too can benefit from learning about project management.

I'm not just referring to senior leaders understanding their roles as sponsors and steering committee members, but something more fundamental.

At its core, project management teaches us to be *specific* about what we're trying to achieve, why we want to achieve it, how we will achieve it, by when and who will make it happen.

In order to make change happen, project management doesn't just teach us about the mechanical process, but it also teaches us also about collaboration, engagement and leading the wider team to a successful delivery.

These are fundamental skills to any leader – even to those that are not involved in change projects.

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Be clear about expectations

Let's look at how senior leaders can benefit from being more *specific*, for example, about what they expect from people on their teams and what each task involves.

What often happens is that managers and leaders are too vague when asking someone to do something and when it isn't done to their standards they either complain or take back control of the task.

Many managers oscillate between micro-managing staff and leaving them to it without any supervision, not realizing that there is a much more elegant way to do it.

The elegant way of getting work done well is by first of all agreeing what a good outcome looks like.

The question that needs to be answered is *when my staff say that they have completed this task, how will I judge, whether it has been done well?*

A really good project management tool that can help here is the **MoSCoW** technique, which stands for *Must-have, Should-have, Could-have* and *Will-not-have*.

In project management we often use it to prioritize requirements. The organizational manager and employee need to agree right from the outset what the employee *must* deliver as part of this task, what they *should* deliver if at all possible, what they *could* deliver if they have extra time (these are non essential nice to have's) and what they *will not* deliver this time around.

If an executive for instance asks an employee to create a board presentation for them, they could specify that the employee *must* create a presentation in PowerPoint that contains at least 10 slides and that each slide must have a visual element as well as text and must relate directly to the organization's 5-point plan. They could also agree that the presentation *should* be peer reviewed and proofread if at all possible by another member of the team. Furthermore, the presentation *could* contain extra background information in an appendix, but that's really not critical. Finally, the presentation *will not* be provided in printed format.

After having agreed the MoSCoW requirements of the task, they should also discuss how often they will touch base with one another.

Candidly agreeing regular touch-points is important because it will help the employee to not feel micro-managed.

Collaborative planning creates buy-in and commitment

Another example from the world of project management that can be of great benefit senior managers is to be more collaborative in their approaches – for instance when they need to solve a problem or produce a plan for an operational activity or for a project.

One of the mistakes that most managers make when coming up with a solution or a plan, is that they create it on their own. They do perhaps get some input and may also ask people to comment on it or review it at the end. But they aren't creating it in a collaborative manner.

The result is a solution or a plan that few people buy into because they haven't been part of creating it and because they don't have any skin in the game. This forces the manager to use a push approach to get work done and to be directive because the team isn't intrinsically motivated.

The alternative is to get all the key players to collaborate right from the outset – that's everyone who will be involved in executing the work.

The best way is for the manager to organize a workshop – or at least ask someone else to facilitate it on his behalf.

The idea is to create a forum where employees are invited to contribute and to be part of the process. Far too often do managers believe that collaboration is the same as simply working with other people. But true collaboration is about sitting at the same table and *jointly* coming up with an outcome that works for everyone. That's by far the best way to gain buy-in and commitment for something.

Motivating staff

The last example I will share is that in project management training we spend a lot of time understanding how to best communicate with different types of stakeholder personalities and what it takes to motivate the team.

This is certainly something that's highly relevant to senior leaders too. Surveys show that a large part of the workforce feels disengaged and that managers aren't sufficiently skilled at understanding the people who work for them. In a similar way to how we map out and analyze stakeholders in a project environment, senior leaders could benefit from mapping out and analyzing their staff with the aim of coming up with strategies for how to better engage and motivate them.

Some of the questions that senior leaders need to ask during this process are *what's in it for my team? What would make each person come to work even if they didn't get a salary for it? What would people like more of and less of in their daily work? How can we celebrate our achievements better? Who do I need to spend more time with? How can I make people feel that their contributions are valued?*

In answering these questions leaders needs to be careful not to guess the answers, but to have one-to-one conversations with people where they ask open questions and truly listen to the employee.

Summary

Teaching project management skills to people who aren't full-time project managers is becoming increasingly popular.

Change is happening in all corners of a business and employees need to be equipped to lead projects irrespective of their role or level of seniority.

Not only does operational staff find that project management can help them with problematic areas relating to scope, schedules and disengaged team members, they also indicate that senior managers and leaders inside the organization would benefit from this kind of training too.

In particular, senior leaders could learn from being more specific about the work they delegate, being truly collaborative in their approaches and understanding how to fully engage and motivate staff.

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