Improving project outcomes: Striking a balance between agility, emotional intelligence and process

Eddie Kilkelly
Managing Director, insynergi

Abstract

A considerable amount of resources has been spent on Programme and Project Management Process training throughout the world and yet the desired improvements often have not materialised. Eddie Kilkelly, Managing Director at insynergi looks at how project managers can determine the right outcomes and strike a balance between agility, emotional intelligence and process.

Throughout my career, project management has changed for the better. There is greater recognition of project management as an important function within the organisation to deliver transformational change. There has been an increase in the professionalism of the discipline, driven by organisations like the Association for Project Management (APM) and the Project Management Institute (PMI). Hundreds of thousands of people are members of these and other professional bodies and many millions have undertaken project management training. In terms of awareness, education and professionalism, we have come a long way – but is it enough? The continued rate and cost of project failure would indicate not.

In its recent “Pulse of the Profession” report, PMI estimates that 44 percent of strategic initiatives are unsuccessful and organisations waste US$109 million for every US$1 billion spent on projects – a staggering amount of money. Despite training more project managers we are still only training around 5% of the project population. Organisations would not take the obvious risk of employing an unqualified corporate lawyer or finance director, but some still think that it is appropriate in project management.

PMI suggests that failure to closely align projects with organisational strategy – a common problem in 58 percent of projects – is a major reason for project failure.

This could be because project leaders misunderstand the organisation’s objectives, or because priorities change and the original project goals are no longer fit for purpose. In both situations, failure could be averted if the project leader takes action to change course, but that requires maturity in the organisation’s approach to projects. This isn’t as easy as it sounds; PMI found that only one-third of high performing organisations could be considered mature (compared with up to eight percent of low performers).

I would agree that maturity plays a major role in delivering successful outcomes. Too many project managers equate “successful project management” with “adhering slavishly to the process” to deliver the end result come what may. Shared goals,
processes and terminology – and having a clearly defined plan of action - are the foundations of good project management, but circumstances can change so adaptability and agility are essential. A confident, experienced project manager will know which parts of the process can be circumvented or changed to deliver a positive outcome, but how can they gain that knowledge without the trial and error that potentially leads to project failure? Equally an experienced project manager will know that the emotional reaction during and after the project completes will be an important measure of success - “just” to deliver is rarely enough.

An increasing number of programme and project managers are developing their professional networks, participating in Academy style programmes, and have coaches and mentors to enable them to make better decisions, faster. A good illustration of the impact of this approach can be seen in the British Government Cabinet Office’s Major Projects Authority (MPA). The MPA set up an Academy for Senior Responsible Owners (SRO) of major government projects, building cohorts of senior programme leaders.

**Learning from experience and best practices**

Almost half of the Government’s programme leaders have attended the Academy and the subsequent improvement in competence and capability helped to generate savings of GBP£1.2 billion in 2012-2013. This is not only a public sector phenomenon; the APM has helped to establish similar professional networks in major organisations like Shell, T-Systems and Royal Mail. It’s notable that just a decade ago these organisations were at the forefront of adopting process improvements; now they are focusing on improving their people to drive transformational change and competitive advantage.

A mature organisation also exhibits executive-level understanding of the importance of programmes and projects which are resourced, supported and prioritised accordingly. Too many executives still see programmes and projects as specific tasks rather than the way all strategic change happens. Similarly, not enough scrutiny is given to the role of project sponsors, typically senior executives, whose influence can deliver valuable support, resource and backing if the project team needs to make its case to colleagues, suppliers, partners and other stakeholders. A common understanding of best practices will also help stakeholders to communicate the business case and expected outcomes more effectively whenever a programme or project is started.

PMI found that less than two-thirds of project sponsors are actively engaged in their projects – a real missed opportunity. I truly believe that many project sponsors simply don’t appreciate the potential importance of their role, or the way in which they can influence people and processes to ensure successful outcomes. The recent adoption of the “Programme Director” role indicates the extent to which the Sponsor delegates his/her role to a subordinate. Is this a capacity issue or indicative of interest levels? In the UK Public Sector it is the SRO who is expected to face the Public Accounts Committee which has a tendency to focus attention. In my opinion,
professional bodies may need to undertake an education and awareness campaign targeted at board-level decision makers to help change outdated perceptions.

Finally, a major blind spot for many project and programme managers who focus on process above all else is the impact of the project and their own behavior on the people involved. A project is less likely to be successful if the people actually impacted by the change, who need to support the change for it to be successful, have not been engaged in the process.

In this respect, project leaders’ benefit from considering the cultural and organisational context of the planned change, actively engaging with people to win hearts and minds, and actively managing the “change curve” that many people experience – of denial, anger, and then (later) acceptance. Unrest, uncertainty, and fear can be managed to make the transition both more comfortable and more successful for all involved. Programme and project managers tend to be more successful in dealing with such people issues when they personally are emotionally intelligent.

The right support

Results are further improved when emotional intelligence is embedded within the corporate culture to improve engagement; indeed, Towers Perrin-ISIR identified that organisations with an engaged workforce improved income by 19.2% in one year.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify, assess, and control your own emotions and identify, assess and react appropriately to the emotions of others. This brings a host of benefits in terms of better communication, improved co-operation, effective leadership and constructive conflict resolution, ultimately delivering better results.

Executives and programme and project managers alike are realising that project management process training isn’t enough. That realisation will be compounded when executives appreciate the true shortage in effective, agile change leaders. In fact, the US PMI estimates 15.7 million extra PM jobs by 2020, in their annual report 2013.

For now, any programme or project manager who wants to become more successful in delivering successful outcomes should consider the following tips:

1. The highest performing organisations have formal processes in place to develop project management competency and for knowledge transfer through strategies like coaching. Who could you learn from or use as a mentor within or outside your organisation? And who, in turn, could you help in their professional development? If there are no obvious internal mentors, approach the local branch of one of the international project management professional bodies for guidance.
2. **Project sponsors** can make a positive difference to the team’s ability to deliver successful outcomes. Engage with your project sponsor, ensure they understand the value of their contribution and encourage them to be actively involved. Manage up as well as down.

3. Consider how you can improve your own competence and the competence of others within your organisation through learning and development opportunities. Always remember that formal learning provides the building blocks; how that learning is actually applied is the key to success. Practical workshops where you learn by doing can be a more effective way of learning than solely theory-based courses. Commit to the change you need to see in yourself.

4. **Think people** as well as process. Good processes will fail if the project team does not consider and deal with the emotional and knowledge needs of the people who will be impacted by the change. How can you integrate soft-skills training in people management and emotional intelligence with project management training to optimise your performance?

5. **Be adaptable** so the plan and the team can flex - within any governance constraints - to deal with challenges and changing priorities. An agile approach will deliver better results, faster.

6. Become the emotionally **intelligent leader** you need to be to bring people with you.

Organisations that can complete projects successfully win a massive head start over the vast majority of their rivals in a competitive market. The right training support and emotionally intelligent people are major components of that success. So how close are you to achieving the right balance of process, people skills and agility?

---

**References**


About the Author

Eddie Kilkelly
Managing Director, insynergi
London, UK

Eddie Kilkelly is Managing Director at insynergi, London, UK. He has been involved in the Best Practice and Change Management industries for two decades, as a Project and IT Service Manager, an implementation consultant and a coach and mentor to senior project and programme managers and project sponsors. Kilkelly helps organisations to achieve their objectives through effective management of change by empowered and confident people. For more information visit www.insynergi.org or email eddie.kilkelly@insynergi.org