

CIHT Dubai Evening Seminar (Online) – Bulletin

Ayodeji Adepoju

Project Management for Real People –
Principles and Practicalities for the Transport Sector

About the Speaker

Ayodeji Adepoju, Director of Sands Civil Engineering Consultancy, UK



Ayodeji Adepoju is a Chartered Engineer with over 15 years' experience in the design and construction of transport infrastructure. His experience includes all stages of design, construction, and project management in the highway and rail sectors. Ayodeji has previously worked as project manager and design project manager at Capita, Mott MacDonald and AECOM. He is the main trainer for PTRC Education & Research Services on training courses including highway design, drainage design and project management.

Presentation

Ayodeji's presentation outlined the complex requirements and activities which make up project management. The key definition relates to applying a range of resources towards meeting or achieving defined stakeholder goals within a programme.

Project management is a critical element to successful delivery of transport infrastructure and at its core are the key elements of planning, coordination and human interaction amongst professionals working as a team. Over the years, project management approaches have evolved into various structured methodologies linked to, and accredited by, industry and professional codes of practice. Within these, whilst projects have unique procedures which vary on a case-by-case basis, a common element is the need to manage, motivate and influence human interaction within teams.

Ayodeji shared a definition of project management from Buchanan and Bobby from 1992:

A project is a unique venture with a defined beginning and end, conducted by people to meet established goals with parameters of cost, schedule and quality.

There are many contributing factors to project success and there is no simple set of best practices applicable in all circumstances. Whilst project managers are trained in the application of recognised approaches, effective conduct brings out the best mix of hard skills (process, controls and contracts) and soft skills (people). People skills, such as leadership, communications, respect and motivation, are needed to manage complex elements of human interaction in the project environment.

In Ayodeji's experience the best project managers are always accessible and open to the discussion of challenges as well as opportunities. A strong 'my door is always open' philosophy will support the achievement of project goals collaboratively.

Good project managers need to understand goals and outcomes, business strategy, be problem solvers and endeavour to track, understand and improve team performance. Another lesson is that project managers should always show their worth and value add.

Good project managers are effective team leaders, working with others to make the whole project a success. They are good communicators who do not shy away from addressing hard truths and difficult news, they challenge 'group think,' identify and deal with free-riders and blockers, ask tough questions and tackle problems promptly.

Project managers act in a leadership position and as such need to lead teams with the right balance of vision, direction and influencing skills. They need to set boundaries and hold people accountable. Different styles of leadership were introduced and discussed. As leaders, project managers have a real opportunity to leave a lasting legacy not only of great projects, but also well-functioning teams and happy individuals. The stages of team development, values and attitudes were introduced and explored.

Project managers must prepare and plan for all eventualities, set the right conditions for good performance and operate at a high level of personal effectiveness.

This interactive seminar from CIHT Dubai provided Ayodeji's personal perspective on the impact of managing team dynamics in a project environment.

Questions

A lot is being discussed about the merits of servant leadership. How does this style – leaders servicing people - fit with the rest of the leadership styles?

Different leadership styles are appropriate for different organisations, projects and circumstances. Servant leadership would not be appropriate in certain project positions or contexts, but the aim should always be to focus on the outcomes wanted by clients and the other contractual parties.

What has been the impact on project teams of the new paradigm of remote working and how can you overcome some of the negative impacts? Thanks

When working in close face-to-face contact with colleagues, relationships are easier and more naturally formed. Taking those formed relationships into the virtual world means that any negative impacts, with regular contact, can be overcome. With regards to teams working with external clients sharing of information and being open in communication, however it is conducted, is very important to building trust.

What is the greatest challenge you have faced in the teams in you have worked and how did you influence it?

Finding the right role for people is always the challenge. Time and effort should be invested to give the right people the right role depending on their skills, knowledge, personality and attributes. A mix of skills and roles across the team is valuable. Teams work much better with diversity and delivery of good project outcomes is achieved.

How can a leader encourage creativity and innovation within his/her team?

It is about setting the right conditions, setting boundaries and accountabilities. The right working environment, leadership style and encouragement of communication will bring out the best in people and creative thinking.

Do you look after your teams in terms of their physical and mental health?

Enabling teams to operate in a supportive and helpful environment, and with everyone playing their part, will bring benefits in mental health. Regular check-ins with the team on performance and wellbeing are also important.

Do you think a PM needs specific practical knowledge of the project he or she is undertaking or merely the theory e.g. can a PM who is an expert on housing build a road intersection as effectively as a PM with highway experience?

Experience and knowledge certainly matters and having people who are closely aligned with the discipline can help achieve success. However, having the mindset of a good problem solver and the ability to think in an agile manner is also key.

Has there been any work which quantifies the benefits of "good" project management - or the costs of "bad" attitudes and behaviour - what's the bottom line?

Good project management does have a beneficial impact on projects in terms of time, cost and quality. Quantification is more difficult, but if good project management is lacking then the outcomes will be reduced, both for the project itself and the individuals working in the team delivering it.

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