PMO Wisdom Interview: Laura Barnard

As part of bringing real PMO’s to our members, our PMO Wisdom Series provides us with an opportunity to interview PMO professionals that bring new and interesting points of view regarding the industry.

The following transcript details our Committee Member Barrie Andrew interviewing Laura Barnard, the CEO of PMO Strategies in the US.

Barrie asks Laura about her story, the future of PMO and in readiness for our upcoming Conference “PMO and Value” how to define and sell the value into an organisation.

Welcome to the Association for Project Management PMO SIG web interview. Today we have Laura Barnard, the CEO of PMO Strategies.

Laura, please tell us a bit about yourself.

Laura is the Founder and CEO of PMO Strategies, and has spent more than 20 years creating impactful and sustainable change for a broad range of organizations, from non-profits to global financial institutions, combining experience in the PMO and Change Management space with passion for helping people get things done to transform how organizations realize business strategy.

Laura believes that project managers are uniquely positioned to assist non-profit organizations in having a greater impact in the local community. She is the Founder and President of Project Management for Change™, a non-profit organization whose mission is to raise the profile of the project management profession by showing the value of project management across the globe as the most effective enabling resource for delivering sustainable change in the non-profit sector. She is the Executive Director of the Project Management Day of Service (PMDoS)™, the record-setting signature event of Project Management for Change.

How did you get into working in PMO’s; and what attracted you to it?

Interestingly, when I was in High School I was good at Maths and Science and decided to study Computing Science at Virginia Tech and really enjoyed it as I loved solving problems. When I graduated I quickly started working on projects and enjoyed being the communication link between the technical and project management teams and facilitating meetings. I discovered that project management and PMO was an ideal fit for me and worked through to building my first PMO about 18 years ago.

3 years ago I started my own company PMO Strategies, which provides training, coaching, advisory and consulting services to various organisations. I specialise in advising executives in businesses how to leverage the PMO model and advise CEOs and executives with their change journey using PMO and project management methods to achieve their strategic objectives and make their change efforts successful.

In addition, I also now run a non-profit organisation Project Management for Change, which has a PMO of up to 70 volunteers all helping to put together large events bringing together hundreds of non-profit organisations in the DC area to help them make a difference.

How long has your PMO been in place?

The Project Management for Change is a non-profit organisation and started in 2014 as a PMO comprised of an enthusiastic band of volunteers of project managers and PMO professionals around the DC area that wanted to make an impact.

What kind of PMO are you currently working in, and what is the size and value of the portfolio managed by the team?

I’m a strong believer project success should be measured from the impact of the outcomes. The difference we make in the community through our service is where the real value is added. The Project Management for Change PMO delivers an annual event helping hundreds of local non-profit organisations. The value of the events is measured in the contribution back to these non-profit communities. It takes about $200k in terms of project management effort to organise and deliver these events. The value from the impact to these non-profit organisations from our volunteers (PMO) has an
immediate 5 times multiplier impact to the community, that’s over a million dollar impact delivered in a single day. As we multiply these events across the states this will continue to grow exponentially.

We need to teach our project managers the value of the outcome is most important and not just the triple constraint and EVM.

It is widely accepted that PMO’s are created to respond to a particular issue/opportunity. What was the trigger for your PMO to be set up and what approach was used to establish it?

A former president of the DC chapter of the PMI and long-time friend came up with the idea of setting up a non-profit voluntary organisation of project managers and PMO professionals to feedback to the non-profit community and to promote the project management profession. I was immediately drawn to it.

He said let’s build a PMO to do this! And we built a PMO organisation based around volunteers to plan a 1-day annual event, and coined the phrase “The impossible PMO” as everyone kept saying it was impossible but our aim was to make the impossible possible.

What is the size of the PMO team and what is the makeup of the team?

The first year it was very simple and focused on all of the operational areas such as event planning, marketing, fundraising, IT, and over time the model evolved to be more sophisticated as we now deliver several programmes each year. The PMO remains strategic in its approach and uses a group of portfolio managers using 1-page status reports to deliver each programme, including the big Project Management for Change non-profit event in the DC area, coaching and mentoring non-profit organisations in PMO methods and we have set up a new non-profit coaching framework.

How do you manage the competency of your PMO team?

All Project Management for Change volunteers are given full access to training materials from PMO Strategies including several training programmes such as: how to train your Sponsor; executive dashboard (tell them what they need to know and stop); change management simplified; beyond the business driven PMO; and the impact engine (turning the PMO into a ROI generator to add value to your organisation). Volunteers can continue to grow and develop through CPD from these training programmes, which enables our volunteers to learn in a safe environment and grow new skills where they feel cared for and supported.

What would you say makes your PMO interesting, different and/or successful?

Everything…

What makes it different and interesting is that our volunteers are here by choice. Our volunteers are there because they want to be, not because they have to be. This is what makes us different and successful. They want to use the power of project management to change the world, and help non-profit organisation using their project management skills and make a difference.

Can you give us some examples of the range of services you provide?

Everything: from the typical PMO services such as standardised templates and process for running projects; to providing an entire playbook on how to set-up a PMO from start to finish; providing training and coaching to project management organisations; providing training and coaching to the non-profit community; and providing pro bono consultancy services to the non-profit community.

Does your PMO have the power to stop initiatives, or have the trusted ear of senior executives, to ensure failing initiatives are stopped?

This is what causes a lot of PMOs to fail if they do not have the trusted ear of executives. They have no power. In my organisation and what has helped many of the PMOs that I have set up is to have a high level executive such as the CEO or COO as the Sponsor of the PMO at the highest level.

The PMO reports to me as the CEO of the company and as sponsor and I report to the board. This means they all understand the power of what we are trying to accomplish, and they understand what we are trying to achieve, we are all in it together.

As value is in the eye of the beholder, what are the key ‘perceived’ benefits that your PMO brings to your organisation?

We make it happen! We are the team that gets things done. The PMO Strategy slogan is ‘Get it done’. This is what PMOs are all about.
The Project Management for Change organisation delivers our strategy of raising the profile of the project management profession and making a positive contribution and impact to non-profit organisations and the small business community.

What would you say are the main challenges faced by your PMO?

Our challenge is about the fact that Project Management for Change is a voluntary organisation. The main challenge is being able to maintain engagement for our volunteers as they all have busy day jobs, and lives.

The initial challenge was establishing credibility as a new voluntary organisation, however we had belief in what we were trying to do, and by setting reasonable expectations we were able to grow and succeed. Deliver and be successful and you will overcome any resistance.

Given the repeating theme that PMO’s only last up to 4 years, why do you think PMO’s are still failing?

There’s a long list of reasons why PMOs don’t last, but I would say the biggest one is taking on too much and focussing too much on the wrong things. If you do this your PMO will be extinct before it has had the chance to make a real impact. It’s about understanding the needs and delivering what you say you are going to deliver. The PMO should deliver value, impact and ROI for your business, not just processes. PMOs should help organisations by truly understanding executive needs and delivering against them, helping them to make the right decisions and take on the right projects, and be brave enough to stop failing projects.

I just wrote an article called “Don’t boil the ocean (when creating a PMO)” which provides more on this topics, available from PMO Strategies website http://pmostrategies.com/blog/

What advice do you have for PMO’s of all kinds to remain current?

Pay attention to successful PMOs. There is a shift happening. PMOs that are successful are paying attention. I have a ton of free articles on this space available from PMO Strategies website. What I find most interesting is the response from the executives outside of the PMO space. They are the ones who get it and communicate back to their PMOs as this is what they need. I strongly believe that the PMO is the answer but the PMO of the future needs to adapt, be agile and deliver against the needs of the executives.

In your view, what distinguishes high-performance PMO’s from those that fail to succeed?

High performing PMOs focus on outcomes and impact and driving return for the organisation.

What do you see to be the PMO of the future?

PMOs need to become more agile and demonstrate value quicker, leading to changing the brand of the PMO to make it appealing and attract new talent.

PMOs of the future are high impact ROI driven organisations that get it done for the business.

The PMO and Value conference is taking place at the Coin Street Community Centre in London’s South Bank on the 25th October.

At the conference, PMO SIG brings together PMO professionals and the value life-cycle. A small number of real life PMO speakers and a large amount of collaboration will enable you to come together with peers and investigate value across its entire life-cycle.

You can find out more and book your place HERE