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Coaching in the Project Environment

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Contents

Acknowledgements

The Association for Project Management (APM) would like to acknowledge and extend its appreciation to the following contributors in helping to create this guide:

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Notes on contributors

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Carole Osterweil works with directors and senior staff delivering organisational change and transformation programmes. Carole has been an Ashridge/EMCC accredited coach since 2003. She's an expert at addressing the cultural and political issues that go with effective project management and coaches teams and individuals to do the same.

Robert Blakemore is an experienced civil servant and project manager. He acts as a mentor to another project manager within his business unit, and actively participates in a Civil Service 'Action Learning set' which is helping to change the management culture within his department. He is writing in a personal capacity.

Susanne Madsen is an internationally recognised project leadership coach, trainer and consultant and the author of *The Project Management Coaching Workbook* and *The Power of Project Leadership*. Susanne is a PRINCE2® and MSP® practitioner and a qualified corporate and executive coach.

Anthony Onabanjo is managing director at Peak Coaching Ltd. Anthony is a qualified executive coach with a background in IT programme and project management. He has a particular interest in behavioural competences and has developed a coaching model (PITS™) to support the development of project managers, teams and stakeholders.

Introduction

Welcome to this ebook, *Coaching in the Project Environment*. We hope you find it useful.

A number of the APM People Specific Interest Group (SIG) Committee members blogged on coaching and mentoring in 2013 and received a significant amount of interest and feedback from the wider APM membership.

Among this feedback appeared to be a fair degree of confusion between coaching and mentoring. This is something we sought to address in the blog. We then ran a pilot coaching session for those new to the topic.

This ebook seeks to build on those initial blog discussions and the coaching pilot by providing a useful resource for colleagues in the project environment.

You will notice a different style within each chapter. A different author was chosen for each chapter, aiming to provide a variety of points of view and emphases. The one thing all the authors have in common is that they have benefited from coaching and can attest to its value.

Moreover, each uses coaching in their 'day job'. Some are 'internal' coaches, i.e. they use coaching techniques within their organisation only. Others are professional coaches who earn a living from their coaching interventions.

We set the scene with Miles Huckle, who uses case studies from his experience of coaching in the project environment to bring the benefits to life. Project managers and learning and development professionals provide a raft of quotations to illustrate the power of being coached.
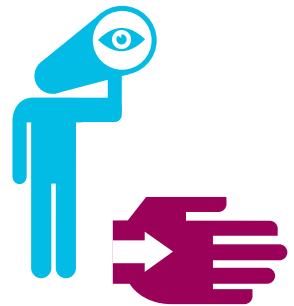
Carole Osterweil uses storytelling to good effect as she presents case studies from the project manager's and project director's perspectives. We hear stories that will be all too familiar to some readers. Carole moves us beyond one-to-one coaching into team coaching to create a high performing project team.

Robert Blakemore then takes up the question of whether coaching or mentoring is the right approach. It will come as no surprise to most readers that the answer depends very much on the specific situation. Robert was one of the key APM People SIG bloggers on this topic and his chapter builds on his blog posts and brings his insights as a project management practitioner to the subject.

Susanne Madsen makes it personal to the reader. She explores what you should consider when looking for a coach. Her concluding section is a list of powerful questions we can all benefit from, including whether you want to move forward formally with a coach or not.

Anthony Onabanjo concludes the book by looking at some of the evidence for the effectiveness of coaching. While coaching is used extensively in organisations worldwide, Anthony was struck while writing his piece by the lack of research carried out into the efficacy of coaching specifically in the project environment.

All in all, the book spans a rich variety of writing styles and perspectives from those who have been coached and those who coach. Hopefully, you will find something of value here that will help you in your development.

<div align="right">
Alun Hughes
APM People SIG
October 2014
</div>

Using coaching in the project environment

Miles Huckle

Coaching has been successfully used in organisations to develop line managers and senior management teams. However, in many organisations, there is a conspicuous lack of coaching provision in project management teams. Now coaching is starting to be used more in the project management function to create and sustain a high performing project delivery capability.

Coaching is a series of structured conversations designed to enable a client (project manager/project team) to achieve their own goals. The client decides what they want to work on. The coach helps the client get there by questioning, challenging and supporting them. The coaching session is confidential. Coaching is about change; the client has to be willing to change.

Coaching provision in organisations
Many organisations offer coaching via:

- Internal coaches, employed by the organisation
- External coaches, contracted into an organisation.

Coaching is typically arranged through:

- Human resources
- Learning and development teams.

Coaches are often made available to:

- Rising talent
- Current leaders with line management responsibility
- Senior executives.

In some organisations, project managers can now access a coach. Where there is no coaching provision, project managers may contract a coach privately to help them work through the challenges they face.

Project coaching topics

Coaching has a very real relevance for project managers. Project managers have asked to be coached on:

- Stakeholder relationships
- Confidence
- Handling the personal fallout from project issues
- Stepping into the project management role for the first time
- Coping with pressure
- Feeling stuck and powerless
- Handling conflicting priorities
- Feeling isolated
- Better ways of working with very senior staff.

The effects of coaching on project managers

Here are some typical comments that we hear from those who have gone through coaching:

- "Underneath I feel a lot more confident and also I am learning how to support myself more effectively."
- "Many people see a project as moving from A to B. It's a technical thing, with processes to follow. What I have learned is that projects will always require some form of behavioural change. Project managers will always need people to do something differently. If project managers haven't experienced personal change through a tool like coaching, they will have very little empathy with the human side of change."

- "I am still in the same project – with actually more pressure as deadlines approach, but I feel more alive than I have for several years. I have managed to take control."
- "The questions my coach asked me opened my eyes to different and new ways to see things, and led me to think about things differently. I have a wider range of possible solutions than previously. A lot of these are actually positive possibilities rather than old, tired, stuck-in-the-mud options."
- "Being accountable without being judged or criticised was actually a unique experience."
- "There was an occasion of 'aha' when I realised the real issues were actually something completely different from what I originally thought. That was a turning point."

Implementing coaching across the project environment

Below are two examples of how coaching in the project environment can make a difference on an individual and organisational level.

Case study – individual

Marc was appointed project manager of an IT project in central Europe. The project spanned several countries. Marc had delivered projects on this scale before. He knew he would face challenges working with all the stakeholders and making sure everything was ready for launch in each country at the right time. So he took up the one-to-one coaching sessions made available, with some additional coaching sessions when particular project issues arose.

"I decided to give coaching a go because of a project manager I had worked with in the past. She had a very, very good relationship with people, and could get the best out of them in every project she worked on. I asked her

how she created such strong relationships. She said she had developed a coaching approach, and always sought to empower project teams to identify appropriate outcomes and work towards them.

"Coaching helps me find the right outcome. This gives me the energy I need to drive the project forwards. In turn, this helps build my confidence. Coaching helps me develop my own skills.

"Coaching gives me a different perspective. Most project managers and delivery staff I have worked with are very analytical – they have a tendency to dive into the detail. Coaching helps bring me back up to a helicopter view and re-prioritise.

"At times, I couldn't see the wood for the trees. Coaching gave me the precious time to think. What shocked me was that I was able to step out of my project and work it through. This fresh perspective enabled me to come up with different priorities, ideas and solutions to the problems I was facing. As a project manager, the coaching also helped me realise that I am sometimes doing work that isn't mine. All this in a 30–60 minute session!

"Coaching allows me to stand back, re-focus on my project and think clearly about how to progress. This helps take a lot of the complexity out of project management and keeps me focused on the outcome.

"Now that I have gained some coaching experience myself, I am finding my relationships with stakeholders are strengthening."

Case study – organisation

A large services organisation identified the need to further develop its project management capability.

The organisation had recently gone through significant expansion, with an increasing array of challenging projects. Numerous project staff were trained in project management, a project management process framework was in place and the project managers were technically competent.

In general, coaching was viewed by staff as a 'correction measure' – a tool to remedy poor performance in operational teams.

However, attitudes changed when the organisation realised that there was an opportunity to help project managers find their own way to overcome the obstacles they faced. The head of learning and development and head of projects developed a business case for coaching to be offered. Having gained commitment, they created a direct facility for project managers and key project delivery staff to have access to a coach.

The head of learning and development explained: "We have our own pool of internal coaches here in the Learning and Development team. These internal coaches supported the development of the leadership function. However, project managers would often miss out on coaching as they were neither line managers nor senior managers. Despite this, our project managers were running business-critical projects.

"Coaching in our business is now recognised as a development tool that helps get the best out of staff.

"Most of our project managers have a day job to handle too, so juggling the

conflict around time and priorities was an issue we expected our project managers to touch on. Now that coaching is used in projects, our project managers clearly have increased confidence, are much more willing to challenge and can find new ways to drive the project forward. Coaching definitely gives them the edge."

The future of coaching within project environments

Organisations looking to use coaches to aid project delivery should seek out coaches who have gone through recognised training and accreditation. Having professional coaches with a project management background helps build rapport between the project coach and the project client.

As coaching is further introduced into project environments, project managers will learn coaching approaches that can be applied more extensively. For example, team coaching will be a key tool to support the recent rise of more facilitative project management approaches which bring stakeholders together on a regular basis.

Coaching has been a largely untapped resource within many project environments. There is a real opportunity to build a greater project management talent pipeline, where project managers and delivery teams are better able to meet the challenges they face.

Types of coaching

Carole Osterweil

When I was asked to write this chapter I was struck by the numerous different labels people use to describe coaching. I took the view that, while these labels might be interesting for coaches, HR and learning and development professionals, my chapter needed to answer two questions:

●   What is coaching?
●   What types of coaching will help me and my project team?

Let's start with a brief definition. John Whitmore (1992), who wrote one of the seminal books on coaching in a business context, describes coaching as, "unlocking a person's potential to maximise their performance at work" and "helping them to learn rather than teaching them". To illustrate this I've focused on the story of Samir (a fictional character based on several project leaders I've worked with recently).

Samir's story 1

When OPMEX heard they had won this £5m contract they were delighted. It was a complex brief – a major reconfiguration of the client's office space at the same time as cultural change through the introduction of new IT and flexible working.

But six months in, Samir, the OPMEX project lead, was having second thoughts. The client team was in disarray. In a recent announcement of an additional round of redundancies, five of the seven workstream leads had learnt that their jobs were at risk. The programme director had retreated and would only focus on deliverables related to the building works. The senior responsible officer (SRO), who was also the workstream lead for culture change, was playing hard to get and was impossible to pin down.

> Samir was doing everything he could to address the situation, and this was taking a significant amount of his time yet was having little impact. He was becoming increasingly stressed. It felt as if OPMEX's reputation was resting on his shoulders and for the second time that week he'd woken up in a cold sweat.

What from Samir's situation resonates for you?

- You are doing more and more yet nothing seems to bring results.
- Stress is increasing.
- Your confidence is waning.
- The project team is not working as effectively as it should.
- You've discovered you cannot rely on key stakeholders.
- The project bears little resemblance to the one you signed up for.
- It feels as if the project's success rests mostly on your shoulders.

While most people think of coaching as part of individual development through one-to-one conversations between coach and client, in recent years, there's been an increasing interest in team coaching. We'll explore team coaching, which is informed by similar principles, through Samir's eyes later in this section.

I mentioned the many labels used to describe types of coaching earlier. The key ones I want to highlight are executive, leadership and project leadership coaching. All of them are relevant for someone like Samir and they largely focus on the same thing – leadership development!

The term used typically reflects organisational culture and the coach's personal preference.

Samir's story 2

By chance Samir ran into someone he knew on the train home who suggested he meet with an executive coach. Samir takes up the story.

What did I expect from coaching? I wasn't sure, possibly someone to bounce ideas off.

Anyway, I was in such a state that I agreed to a taster session. My coach started by explaining that everything we discussed would be totally confidential.

Things started to change from that session. It was the first time I'd been able to download everything going on in my head without worrying about how to navigate through the maelstrom. It was so helpful to take this step back and look at the situation, including how I felt about it. I could see how I had got into a spiral of feeling under threat, angry and even depressed. At my lowest points I'd been worrying I might do something I'd regret. Understanding this big picture allowed me to identify where the real issues lay and from this more informed place I began to see a way through.

We ended the session discussing how to take this forward. I went away and wrote a business case for a block of five further sessions. I had clear goals – to build on the work we'd done, to develop strategies for influencing the key client stakeholders, including the SRO, and to protect me from burnout.

I've a very different understanding of coaching now. I'd say its purpose is to allow you to understand yourself better and see how and why you react in particular situations, and to support you in developing an approach that will work for you personally.

Crucial aspects are confidentiality and developing a trusting relationship with your coach. As mine told me, "You have to be willing to open your kimono and take a good look at yourself." Another crucial aspect is what she describes as the coaching contract, which sets out what you want to achieve through coaching.

In the fourth session it was very clear that the project team was not performing – there were some tricky relationship issues which I had tried to address through the usual routes, without success.

I'm used to getting the team together as part of the project kick-off, and we meet regularly to monitor progress and troubleshoot project issues. But this was different – I began to realise that I needed to think of the project team as an entity in its own right and I needed everyone in the team to step up and take responsibility for the team's performance as well as their own. That meant a big change in the way people were thinking and behaving.

As executive coaching was working so well for me, I wanted to find out what team coaching could offer. My coach suggested I speak with one of her previous clients, Jean.

What is team coaching?

Team coaching (sometimes called systemic team coaching or performance coaching) is summarised in Figure 1:

A process of working with the whole team, together and apart

Coaching them to collaborate and develop their collective and individual leadership

In order to achieve specific outcomes, for which they are mutually accountable

And to engage effectively with key stakeholders

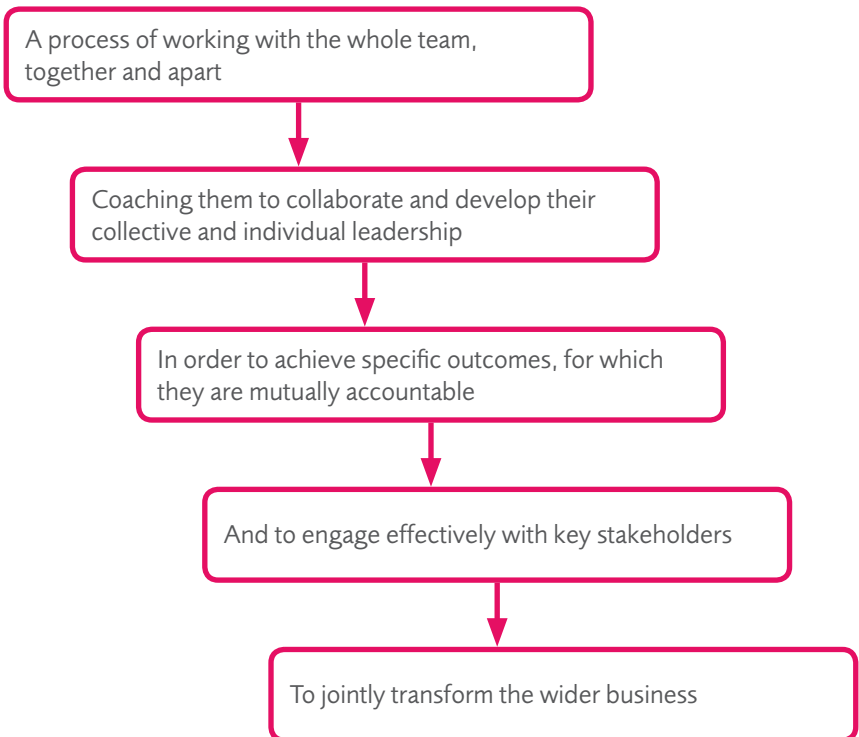To jointly transform the wider business

Figure 1   Systemic team coaching.
Source   Based on Buckle and Lines (2012)

There are both similarities and differences between project leadership coaching and team coaching.

- Team coaching aims to unlock the team's potential and maximise its performance, by helping the team and its individual members to learn.
- It relies on confidentiality and developing open and trusting relationships with the coach and between team members.
- There is a coaching contract which is developed with the team members – not the team leader on behalf of the team. Everyone has to sign up to it and agree the coaching goals.

Here's how it worked for Jean.

Jean's story

As project director I could see that things had to change.

I had a team of highly talented and committed individuals who had worked pretty well together in the initial phases of the project. Yet changes outside our control had introduced a different dynamic. They were putting the same energy into their work, but they seemed to be operating as individuals rather than a high performing team. What's more, at times you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. And, to be frank, I needed more from them – especially given our project's growth aspirations.

The coach started with confidential, one-to-one meetings with me and all my senior team members. The aim was to clarify and build awareness of the team's issues and to scope the work. She then developed a team coaching contract which was agreed with all the senior project team members. Its aim was to transform the culture of the project team,

which we recognised would mean finding new ways of behaving towards each other. The contract allowed for different types of work with the coach:

- Sessions with the full team to identify and resolve challenging project and relationship issues
- In-depth work with sub-groups where there were specific relationship challenges
- Coaching sessions for individuals
- Telephone coaching conversations as needed.

When I first heard her proposal for team coaching it sounded like a huge commitment and, to be honest, a bit risky, but on balance I judged that the gains would far outweigh the investment.

I've not been disappointed – the project team has really stepped up.

- The team has taken ownership of all the project goals and consistently sees delivering the whole project (rather than their part of it) as the primary focus.
- They work more effectively as a team and on a one-to-one basis, for example they are now able to raise and deal with conflict constructively.
- They now appreciate the wider stakeholder challenges of delivering the project and are actively engaging with them.
- Individually their leadership and people development skills have come on in leaps and bounds.
- We are seeing the impact across the organisation as they become involved in other projects and are using their newly acquired skills to raise the game of other project teams.

Mentoring or coaching?

Robert Blakemore

Both mentoring and coaching have their place in modern project management organisations, and the developmental goals and expected outcomes are often the same. But the timing and method of their deployment can be quite different. The difference depends on the type of person being mentored or coached (sometimes called the client).

In general mentoring is a longer term arrangement than coaching. The mentor, who will be an experienced project manager from outside of the line management chain, will work with the client in weekly or monthly sessions whilst the client considers this arrangement to be beneficial. The client may be someone new to the profession or the particular organisation (and 'how things are done here') or someone more experienced in another field who is perhaps changing career, and is new to project management. The mentor will offer help, advice, support and will work with the client to develop project delivery improvement options.

Similarities and differences

Mentoring	Coaching
Mentoring is more directive and will reflect less experience and understanding of what is required.	Coaching tends to be shorter term, with less directive support or advice, and the client will often already be credited with the experience needed to work things out for themselves.
Mentoring might be supplemented by formal training to help improve the client's functional knowledge.	People who are coached are often more senior and tend to be most receptive if coached by those whom they consider their peers.

Mentoring is more supportive and incrementally developmental, whereas coaching needs to provide challenge.	Coaching can be used effectively to bring experienced staff up to speed with new approaches, methodologies or tools.

The person who is the coach or mentor does not need to be always right, but he or she should be able to spot areas of potential weakness and assertively ask the project manager to justify his or her approach. This should provide the project manager with greater insight into his or her approach and any alternative options – not in a judgemental way, but perhaps against a maturity model which shows the type of documentation, actions and behaviours that strong project management and a good project manager would demonstrate. Assurance can therefore be a useful source of input to the discussions, and indeed can be seen as a type of coaching in its own right.

If a project is apparently running into problems, mentoring or coaching may or may not be helpful, and this will depend on the reasons why things are going wrong. So that's the first thing that needs to be established by the coach or mentor. Even for the most experienced project manager, things can sometimes get tough. Maybe the context changes, they don't get the support they need or the estimating or risk management goes unexpectedly awry. If something like this is happening, mentoring in a specific area, or more formal retraining in a subject area, might be more appropriate than coaching.

Finding the right fit

The mentor or coach should take the time to understand the client, what they already know, what they want to achieve from the intervention, and the context of their current work. Any assistance can then be targeted to get the desired results. Specifically, some things to understand before starting are:

- The client's experience.
- The scale of the project that they are managing.
- Whether they are starting afresh or taking over from someone else. There needs to be some understanding of the project constraints and the current trajectory of the project manager (do they have to move fast, or do they have more time to plan their work?).
- The project organisation's corporate culture and expectations for such issues as compliance with a preferred company methodology, use of project management document templates, the interfaces with other projects providing a critical component or capability, or dependent suppliers and the approach that they take to project management. In other words, advice on content and priority needs to be tempered by the organisation's expectations of how its project managers will function, and what good project management actually looks like in that organisation.
- How improvement will be measured.

Setting goals for improvement

The client needs to see measurable improvement in performance in order for it to be sustained. So it is important to measure the right thing, as initially performance improvement might not be rapid. The mentor needs to set achievable goals and make them more challenging as these are progressively met. It is important that the client takes responsibility for their own improvement early on.

In coaching, prioritisation of planning can help the project manager identify and focus upon particular areas of weakness or blindness which might be relevant to where the project currently sits in its overall lifecycle. This perceived weakness may be a failure to identify and exploit opportunities as well as risk. It may be that the risk management approach does not sit well with the particular project phase or particular suppliers, or it may not have adequately developed as the project has matured, or perhaps it no longer fits well with the organisation's risk response objectives if the project context has changed. It may be something fundamental that

has been missed, such as a plan to sustain the capability for the long term, and the development or evolution of an operating model that will function in the sustaining organisation. This is a particular concern if that organisation is culturally very different from the project manager's own. This could result from earlier assumptions that might never have been explored or considered with stakeholders or suppliers and actually confirmed as valid.

Coaching goals may therefore be set as something more formal and challenging – perhaps written into an audit or assurance report or resulting from an end-of-year performance review.

Benefits in the project environment

Mentoring can consistently improve a client's functional project management knowledge when mixed with formal training over a period of months. This style of development allows the client an element of experimentation as they apply what they have learnt with the guidance of the mentor, while receiving feedback from the mentor on the success of what has been implemented.

Mentoring can help in successfully applying some particularly difficult project management theory. For instance, turning estimating theory into practical project management expertise, particularly in terms of dealing with aspects such as optimism bias, is much easier when guided by someone who knows. If the client is experiencing real problems in applying the theory, follow-on development activity, such as piloting an approach or partnering with another project manager undertaking similar work (if possible) can extend mentoring into a period of corporate buddying.

Mentoring is most beneficial for a project early in its lifecycle. For instance, it can help with the tailoring or application of a methodology or project approach. Early

decisions on the application of project methodology and approach ("should I use agile?") made wisely early on, will prevent many difficulties that might be experienced later if the wrong decision is made right up front. Stories or learning from experience documents, or project closure documents, are also very useful in emphasising and embedding the approach that has previously succeeded for a particular type of project in a specific organisation.

Coaching provides more focused interventions in specific functional project areas such as project planning. Often, project plans and documents receive a lot of attention early in the project, but as real issues and problems surface they can be neglected in favour of day-to-day firefighting. Coaching helps restore a sense of perspective, although it helps if trust has been established well in advance of things getting tough so that the advice will actually be considered rather than being immediately dismissed as something that will cause the project to lose its momentum.

Coaching explores gaps in project documentation or project plans, and what the impact of those omissions might be. Poor estimating is something that affects all projects, particularly where these are breaking new ground or using innovative approaches or methodologies. Encouraging project managers to justify their estimations or risk approach may help to uncover some unjustified decision making. Similarly exploring whether enough time has been allocated to assurance activity, and correct identification of all legal, policy and approvals processes, and the people that might need to be consulted or involved with these approvals, can indicate whether the project manager is truly thinking holistically and whether a coaching intervention might help.

Sometimes inexperienced project managers might take on too much themselves, and might not ask for additional resources early enough. A coach should be prepared to ask open and honest questions early on about appropriate resourcing.

Coaching brings project managers up to date with the latest technical developments (provided, and assuming, that the coach is sufficiently knowledgeable in these, and has made sufficient effort to maintain a programme of CPD and familiarity with current corporate strategy). It can help unearth delivery or technical assumptions that are irrelevant to the actual project in hand, or have not been appropriately recorded or confirmed. Coaching might help to identify alternative approaches or technologies, including joining up other project managers who have the same technical goals, or need to use the same technical approaches, to exploit organisational knowledge more widely. It doesn't necessarily mean that the project manager will, or should, change the proposed approach – but it might give them something to think about if timelines are tight, or if they need to innovate to ensure benefits will be realised and the project will succeed.

Conclusion

Much of what a good project manager will do comes from their previous experience of what has worked well for them. They might not always write this down, but it is certainly good practice to do so when thinking about improvement and how others might be able to help identify where gains could be made relatively easily or quickly – by changing an attitude, behaviour or approach. In some environments, notably government ones, there might actually be a regulatory reason to record the thinking and information used in making major decisions.

If the project manager keeps a blog or record of the work that they have done and the priority of the actions they have decided to take, it can facilitate mentoring or coaching, and it can form the basis of a mentoring discussion. Particularly under pressure, actions might be taken which on reflection might not have been the priority. Very often the pressure to deliver means that some very useful opportunities are not identified or pursued, perhaps because they are seen as a distraction to the project delivery – it is important to maintain visibility of the project context throughout the life of the project, to ensure appropriate reaction to external changes, which may require the project deliverables to be amended or delivered in a different way.

Coaching and mentoring can be very helpful in reminding project managers of the wider context of the project, helping them to see the big picture. In particular, it is important that all project managers, however experienced, are reminded of their corporate delivery responsibilities beyond the immediate project that they are managing.

A coach or mentor cannot ultimately take the decisions that the client may need to make. Indeed, if they were in that position, they might take radically different decisions, perhaps in a different order of priority, based on their own experience. What they can do, however, is use their experience to increase the client's awareness of the likely consequences of either action or inaction.

The decision as to whether to use coaching or mentoring is therefore driven primarily by the clients' expectations. Do they want to work to formal 'stretch targets' with a performance improvement goal in mind, or are they happier seeking informal advice on how they might better approach something like estimating or a new risk management strategy?

How to get the most from coaching

Susanne Madsen

To get the most from coaching, it's important that you select a coach who understands your development needs and who is equipped to help you achieve the things that are important to you. A good coach is someone who deeply listens to you and uses incisive questions to help you gain clarity and motivation in a situation that you are unsure about.

Feeling that there is good rapport between you and your coach is imperative as you may otherwise be reluctant to open up and share your challenges and ambitions. Rapport means that you understand and respect each other and that there is mutual trust between you so that you can talk about your concerns and weaknesses without feeling that you have to justify them. We could also say that rapport is when there is a mutual absence of vulnerability between you and your coach.

Some of the characteristics of a good coach in a project environment are:

- Good listener
- Good observer
- Focuses on your needs
- Asks insightful questions
- Serves as a self-reflecting mirror
- Has a genuine interest in helping
- Builds instant rapport
- Emotionally intelligent
- Patient
- Has experienced working in a change environment
- Is a trained coach
- Keeps all conversations confidential.

So how do you find this great coach who can fully encourage and support you?

The first step is to be clear about what you would like to gain from coaching and what your development needs are. Are you predominantly looking for someone who can help you get to grips with project management techniques like estimation, planning and risk management, or are you more interested in developing your leadership and people skills?

If you are mostly interested in developing your project management skills, or would like career advice, choose a coach who has already managed the kinds of projects you would like to manage and who is well connected within the industry. If, however, you are more interested in working on deeper behavioural aspects relating to how you manage yourself and others, it would be wise to choose a coach who already exhibits the behaviours you are looking for. If you would like to come across as a calm, confident and thoughtful project leader, look for a coach who already has these qualities.

For coaching in the project environment, it is likely that you will need a mix of skills augmentation and leadership development. It is therefore important that your coach straddles both; that they have relevant experience of working in a project environment AND possess the right coaching skills to work with you at a deeper level. Many project managers believe that they predominantly need to improve their technical skills. But in reality they need to work on their interpersonal skills over and above their technical skills. In addition it is common for people to feel unsure about themselves and to lack confidence in their abilities. They may not be aware of it, but a good coach will detect it and work with them to strengthen their self-esteem.

Look for competence and credibility
When you look for a coach, choose someone who is fully qualified. Coaching is a relatively new profession and nothing prevents people from calling themselves a coach. Although a coaching qualification is not a guarantee of quality, it does

indicate a certain level of proficiency and tells you that the coach has been professionally trained to work with you. If you take on a coach who hasn't received any formal training you could end up with someone who doesn't put your needs first. There are many organisations out there that provide good qualifications, for instance the Association for Coaching, the International Coach Federation, Coach U or The Coaching Academy, as well as many universities and business schools.

Have an initial conversation

When you find a coach you think may be suitable, have an initial conversation, either by telephone, Skype or face to face. Tell them what you would like to gain from coaching and listen to their feedback. Do you feel that they 'get you'? Do they listen to you properly and ask questions to understand your situation? Do they make you feel at ease and do you feel that there is rapport between you?

You can also use this initial meeting to ask them how they work and to gauge if their approach suits you. How often do they suggest that you have your coaching sessions? Will it be in a way that suits you? Will you be able to get hold of your coach at short notice and will they provide support via email in between sessions if need be?

A good coach will have a certain way they would like to work but will also be flexible enough to meet some of your special requests. Note that face-to-face coaching isn't necessarily better than telephone coaching. Both can be very effective, but to build good rapport it would be great if you can meet face to face at least some of the time.

You might also want to ask the coach if they will make use of a questionnaire at the beginning of the coaching relationship and if they will assign you homework or actions in between sessions. All coaching sessions should be supported by an action plan and clear outcomes. An effective coach is someone who challenges you and

who will hold you accountable for the actions you take. It is also worth noting that a good coach is someone people are happy to recommend and endorse. So ask the coach if they can put you in touch with some of their previous clients or if they have any testimonials they can share with you.

Assess the relationship
When you have found your coach and worked with them for a little while, review the relationship and assess if it's effective and moving you forward. If there are aspects that concern you, discuss them with your coach. Frequent, honest and relevant feedback encourages an environment of open communication between you.

If you work with a coach who has become a role model for you, be careful not to get blinded or feel that you have to mirror them. It is important that you follow the path that feels right for you. Everything you do and the action you take should be integral to what you would like and the things that feel right to you.

Be willing to take action in between sessions
To get the most from coaching, it is not enough that you choose a great coach. You will also have to do your part during the actual coaching. You need to have a desire for change, an open mind and a commitment to taking action in between sessions. Your coach may ask you to write down key statements, goals and actions, and may also give you home assignments to work on. The real action of coaching takes place in your life and on your projects as a result of the action you take. The best way to excel is to apply your insights and learning to the projects you work on straight away.

Coach yourself with insightful questions
You can further accelerate your progress by regularly taking a step back and asking insightful questions of yourself about your ambitions and the project you are working on. Pondering the questions below will help you to deepen the coaching

sessions.

- What type of project manager would you like to become?
- Which personal qualities would you like to be known for and which values would you like to express at work?
- Who are your role models and what makes you admire them?
- How can you stretch yourself more in your current role and how can you make better use of your talent?
- What is not working as well as it could on your current project?
- What do your customers complain about and what can you do about it?
- Who do you need to spend more time with (clients, managers or team members)?
- Which important activities do you procrastinate on?
- What is your unique contribution to the project and how can you accentuate it?
- How can you better motivate and use the strengths of your team members?
- Which tasks can you start to delegate and to whom?
- How can you firefight less and be more proactive?
- What are the 20% of activities that add to 80% of your results?
- Which meaningful improvements can you implement on your project?

The case for project coaching

Anthony Onabanjo

Coaching within corporate organisations has been on the increase since the 1990s. In a survey reported by the Institute for Leadership and Management (ILM), 80% of organisations surveyed had used or were using coaching (ILM, 2011).

However, as has been suggested in earlier chapters, coaching within project management environments is still in its infancy. So, project organisations have the opportunity to use coaching interventions to develop project managers and teams and improve project outcomes.

This chapter provides evidence of the benefits of coaching and builds a case for the use of coaching within project environments.

A fresh perspective

Coaching can be defined as "the process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective", (Styhre and Josephson, 2007).

Table 1, below, highlights the difference in approach between the project manager and the project coach.

Table 1   The different approaches of project managers and project coaches

Project manager	Project coach
Instruct/direct	Ask and listen
Control team members' work	Confidence in team members' work
Know the answers	Search for the answers

Point out faults	Promote learning
Problem solver and decision maker	Work as a collaborating partner and an organiser
Delegate responsibility	Encourage all team members to take responsibility
Create structure and procedures	
Do things right	Focus on visions and flexibility
Position in hierarchy creates power	Do the right things
Focus on results	Emphasise knowledge and humility
	Focus on the processes that create results

Source   Adapted from Berg and Karlsen (2007)

Professional development

One of APM's *FIVE Dimensions of Professionalism* is commitment. APM members are expected to commit to at least 35 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) every year. Coaching is recognised by APM as an effective intervention for the development of project management professionals so coaching hours logged are acceptable evidence of CPD.

The *APM Competence Framework* (APM, 2008) consists of 47 competences required for effective project management. Nine of these are behavioural competences such as leadership, communication, teamwork and conflict management. Generally, behavioural competences are given little attention within project organisations. However, studies have shown that gaps in behavioural competences contribute to project management failure (Berg and Karlsen, 2007). Therefore, there is an urgent need to bridge this gap. One-off training courses can

provide knowledge, but behaviour change usually requires a process of ongoing practice and feedback – which is exactly what coaching offers.

Studies (Nixon et al., 2012) have confirmed the need for project managers to prioritise training in leadership skills, and the need for continuous professional improvement to enhance leadership outcomes. And Sumner et al., (2006) have shown that managers with positive leadership behaviours achieve successful project outcomes. Several studies, including a survey conducted by the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), have shown that coaching is an effective tool for leadership development (CIPD, 2009).

Personal development

Personal coaching provides an opportunity to address personal challenges – such as confidence or work/life balance issues, or to explore personal development opportunities.

Coaching increases self-awareness so that project managers and team members are better able to understand themselves and how to adjust their behaviours to foster positive relationships within project environments. This aligns with the findings of a master's degree research project conducted at Middlesex University (UK) exploring the question, "Can coaching and the coaching relationship improve an individual's ability to project manage?" This study found that the benefits of coaching include increased emotional intelligence (self-awareness and self-management), improved communication skills and increased self-esteem (Goldblatt, 2004).

Project coaching case studies
Norwegian Telenor
Berg and Karlsen (2007) describe coaching at a Norwegian telecoms operator that followed a pre-determined, five-stage process. Generally, this lasted three to four months and involved around 10 meetings between the coach and the project manager. Each coaching session lasted an hour.

The project managers were coached on personal challenges, such as frustration or a lack of self-confidence in the management role. The authors note: "One of the benefits of coaching is it provides a safe and supportive 'room', which allows the individual to express and explore fears and anxieties, identify coping strategies and skills, and test out new behaviour." And they add: "There are usually few opportunities for leaders to confide in colleagues and direct reports, and there are even fewer possibilities to test out new behaviours. The fear of failure can be inhibiting."

In other areas, results coaching helped the project managers clarify approaches to project tasks, structure the project processes and create project results according to specified goals. The study reported that project managers are often very uncertain about what is expected of them, particularly during the early stages of projects. There are uncertainties not only about the task but sometimes around their own abilities. The report goes on to describe how a project in its initiation phase was reduced from 18 to two months as a direct consequence of results coaching.

Swedish construction site managers
This was a one-year academic study of coaching (Styhre and Josephson, 2007) involving six site (project) managers in a Swedish construction company. The coaching focused on the site managers' own interests and their desire to develop their own skills and competences as site managers.

Site managers reported improvements as a result of coaching in their overall leadership skills, including delegation, conflict management and communication skills. One of the site managers had received feedback that his communication was "more detailed and more easily understood", while another site manager said he was "a better listener".

The site managers also reported that they found the coaching very supportive in an industry that did not usually support site managers. The coaching provided them

with a space to reflect and see things from other perspectives and so they were able to manage conflict better.

Fortune 500 company
Another Berg and Karlsen study (2013) focuses on two project managers who took part in a nine-month executive coaching training programme as part of their personal development plans. The programme consisted of five seminars, each lasting two days and covering a range of coaching tools. The project managers regularly practised using the various coaching tools learnt on the training programme.

The project managers were able to use various coaching and leadership tools to reduce their own stress and that of their team members. They reported that, following the coaching programme, they could handle difficult decisions or conflicts without fear or stress. They also stated that the coaching improved their motivation and self-confidence.

NHS hospital
This involved three team leads. A total of six sessions, each lasting 2.5 hours, were held monthly (Woodhead, 2011).

This study summarised the benefits of the team coaching programme run in the NHS as: "providing a forum for dialogue, giving focus and clarity of shared goals, increasing trust and collaboration, enabling a systemic understanding and approach to problem solving, improving communication, decision making and commitment to achieving collective outcomes. It also helped to develop personal and interpersonal relationships and dynamics by breaking down barriers, creating a sense of belonging and a deep empathetic understanding of each other."

Heathrow Terminal 2

The Heathrow Terminal 2 project that successfully completed in June 2014 also used team coaching intervention in the final eight months of the project. This involved 12 workstream leaders (*Coaching at Work*, 2013).

The HR lead said: "It has been the most powerful development that I have seen. It has been transformational in the ways that we have worked through interventions." Other reported benefits included improved communication and trust.

Conclusion

This chapter shows some case studies and research on coaching within project environments. There is evidence of benefits in the development and performance of project managers and teams.

Experts from the BI Norwegian business school summarise the benefits of coaching to project managers as follows: "Coaching helps the project manager identify the current situation and implement the right project leadership style; the project employees reduce stress and uncertainty and increase motivation; create a culture for improved learning in the project; the project manager make the most out of the project team; and helps the organisation develop new project managers." (Berg and Karlsen, 2007)

Coaching benefits to teams include improvements in communication, trust, interpersonal relationships, decision making, problem solving and overall team performance.

APM's 2020 vision is 'a world in which all projects succeed'. With the British Computer Society (BCS) reporting project failure in the European Union (EU) to the tune of £142bn and KPMG reporting average losses incurred by businesses at £8m per failed project, there is a strong case for project organisations to incorporate coaching into their learning and development strategies so that project leaders and

teams are better equipped to deliver successful projects – moving us towards achieving that vision.

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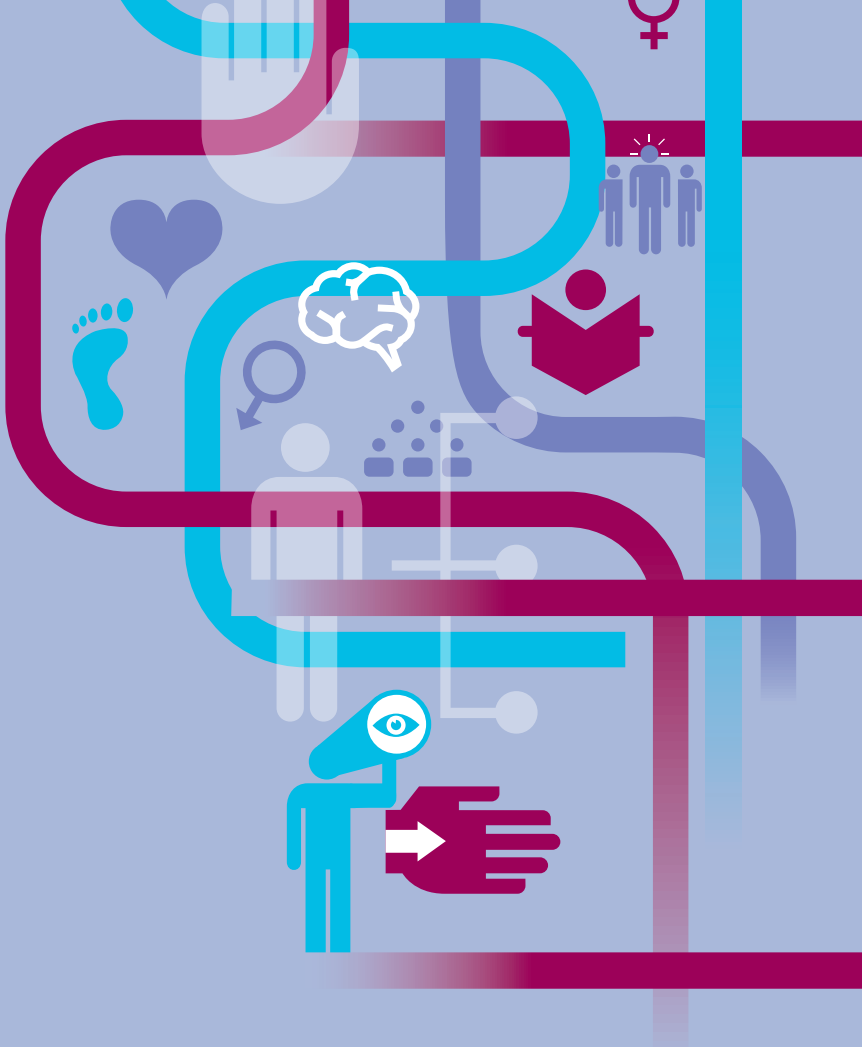
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Notes

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