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Title: Charting a course, embarking on a journey: Developing leadership competences in complex project management

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Summary: This paper explores the development of an executive education programme requested by a project-based organisation seeking to progress to the next level regarding project management leadership competences –reflecting the changing world– and building a common approach. We draw on recent research in management education, leadership and project management competence development and describe how current challenges in these areas have been taken into consideration in our programme design development, delivery and evolution. We identify key learnings points and conclude with some reflections.

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Introduction

In today's global world, leaders of project-based organisations along with their employees have to make sense of and respond to a world described to have volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) conditions (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) generated by circumstances such as changing pace of technology, political and social shifts and a constant changing competitive landscape. Furthermore, it is important for leaders of these organisations to address the ongoing challenges in agile ways. One particular route is looking towards developing organisational capabilities through investment in training and education programmes (Fulmer and Goldsmith, 2000; Conger, 2004; Avolio et al., 2010; Akrofi, 2019). Education programmes are seen to be able to add benefits in two directions - the first is in ensuring the alignment of the organisation through the establishment of common practices enabling efficiencies through coherence, and the second is appropriate 'onboarding' of new knowledge and skills.

This paper explores the development of an executive education programme requested by a project-based organisation seeking to 'strengthen its higher level leadership behaviour competences for delivering major project, programme and portfolio initiatives successfully along with developing deeper relationships with customers and hence opportunities for levering further business'[1]. In particular the organisation was seeking to move to the next level regarding project management leadership competences –reflecting the changing world– and building a common approach – the organisation's way.

Developing leadership competences in complex project management

Managerial and leadership competence development is recognised as important for businesses to remain competitive (Drejer, 2000; Collins and Holton, 2004; Boyatzis, 2008; Medina and Medina, 2015). Research in human resource management and development has advanced our understanding of competences, how they are developed and how they can contribute to enhancing performance (see Boyatzis, 2008).

In a recent review, Cha and Maytorena (2019) note that in the field of project management, studies in managerial competence have been wide ranging. For example, studies identify competences for managing projects (Crawford, 2005), competences for different project types (Crawford and Nahmias, 2010; Palacios-Marques et al., 2013) and project stages (Havila et al., 2013), and develop competence frameworks (Suikki et al., 2006; IPMA, 2006; PMI, 2007; APM, 2008). This body of work is important for understanding the development needs of project managers and it is an attribute which has also been developed through training and education programmes (Alam et al., 2008; Bredillet, 2008; Hartman, 2008; Thomas and Mengel, 2008; Eskerod, 2010; Cordoba and Piki, 2012; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2017; Lee-Kelley, 2018). Research has shown the value and contribution of project management competence development (Buganza et al., 2013), competence retention (Bastian, et al., 2016); and competence management (Medina and Medina, 2017) in project-based organisations.

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[1] This quote is taken from an internal company document which, for reasons of confidentiality, cannot be cited.

One specific competence which is highlighted as important in this body of work, is that of 'leading'. Although leadership development has been an area of interest for many years (Ready and Conger, 2003; Conger, 2004; Day et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2018), there has been less coverage in the field of project management, with some exceptions (Mengel, 2008; Stoyan, 2008; Thomas and Mengel, 2008).

Recent research on leadership development approaches has identified two important challenges that need to be addressed when developing business management and leadership curriculum (Fleming et al., 2018), and therefore relevant for complex project leadership development. First, we need to ensure that management education is holistic, rigorous and relevant; it needs to align more strongly and closely to practice (Thomas et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2014). The intention is to facilitate a process of putting academic research into practice by better understanding the realities managers have to deal with. In this way the theory-practice gap which has been widely discussed in literature (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) can be narrowed. Second, we need to ensure a move away from 'leader-centred' approaches with notions of leaders as 'heroes' (Collinson and Tourish, 2015; Fleming et al., 2018; Antonacopoulou, 2018) towards leaders as reflective (Schön, 1984; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2017) and reflexive practitioners (Cunliffe, 2016; Easterby-Smith and Cunliffe, 2017). In this paper we explore how through the design and development of an executive education programme these two challenges can begin to be addressed.

Programme overview

The commissioning organisation is project-based, operating across the globe and with a staff of over 80,000. It seeks to provide innovative solutions, to ensure operational excellence and have a diverse and talented workforce. Those wishing to commission the education programme were keen for the programme to not only enhance leadership of complex projects but also to be integrally involved in its design and delivery. As such, the programme was a co-designed melding-together of a blend of academic know-how and industry appetite and experience. In this way a process of knowledge co-production was embarked upon (Gibbons, et al., 1994; Berggren and Söderlund, 2008)

Reflecting the demands of the organisation, the programme focused on including what both parties perceived to be critical to complex project leadership. The final design included the development of competences in: a) managing and engaging stakeholders (Winch, 2016; Eskerod and Lund, 2013; Ackermann and Eden, 2011); b) managing complexity, risk and uncertainty systemically (Williams 2005; 2017; Winch and Maytorena, 2009); and c) leadership of self and team (Ancona et al., 2007; Martin, 2012; Thomas et al., 2013). These three competences served as a starting point for developing deeper competences in project leadership, such as driving business growth through winning new business as a result of collaborative working (touching on engaging stakeholders), and development of project management execution strategies and resultant leadership implications (Merrow, 2011; Barshop, 2016; Merrow and Nandurdikar, 2018).

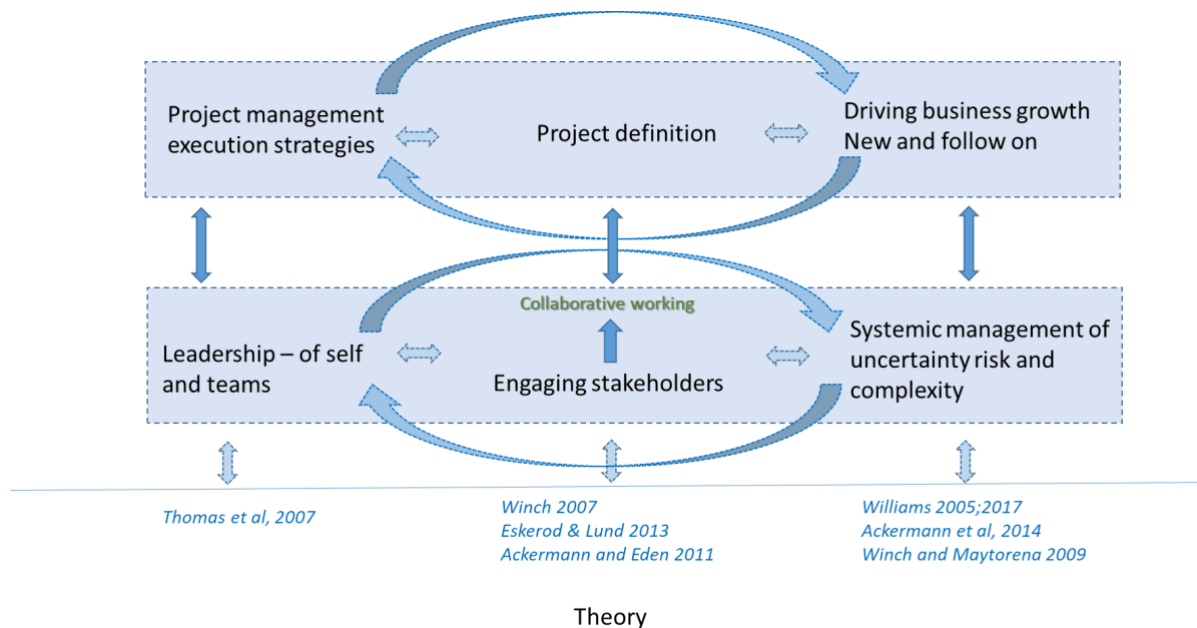An overview of the competences is given in figure 1.

Figure 1. Theory informing programme competences.

The resulting 14-month programme is designed to guide delegates in applying theory, lessons of experience and examples of good judgment and practice to their current and future project practice. The programme design therefore aims to address the leadership development and management education challenges already noted.

The programme requires:
  a. two month's preparatory individual work using online workbooks and reading, provided through a virtual learning environment;
  b. attendance and participation at two separate weeks of concentrated residential master class sessions six months apart;
  c. substantial further work following each residential session:
    i. application of learning back in the delegates' working environment, evidenced through a reflective practice piece of work;
    ii. participation in action learning sets to support each delegate's application of learning;
  d. presentation of the impact/realisation of benefits resulting from the application of the delegate's learning to an organisational panel.

The course and journey

Design and development of the programme

One of the first challenges facing the team was to determine how much theory to include in the teaching materials. Recognising Lewin's view that 'there is nothing as practical as good theory' (1943) there was also the importance of agreeing on which theory to include. An obvious place to start was to review those theories that had already been established in practice; those which were developed through researcher adopting action research as a research methodology and ideas which were evidence based (Rousseau et al., 2008; Briner et al., 2009). The co-development process of content definition thus followed three steps: 1. academic identification of relevant as well as rigorous theory (Pettigrew, 1997); 2. review of the theory by organisational champions for fit; 3. consideration of theory in conjunction with other bodies of

theory to ensure there were no issues with incommensurability and pragmatic assessment of the bandwidth available.

Alongside this was an awareness of the need to produce a 'seamless' product whereby the materials developed from the theories informed one another and built a coherent whole. This was achieved through constant revision of the learning material and also through academics attending each of the masterclass sessions. Thus, we engaged in a dialectical form of inquiry where the experiences of the commissioning and academic team were juxtaposed. In this manner we began to address the challenge of creating a holistic, rigorous and relevant management education programme (as noted in the introduction).

The design also considered the balance between content and process (Checkland and Winter, 2006). Broadly, the content is 'what to incorporate' and the process is 'how to incorporate it'. Therefore, we needed to ensure that the course not only comprised theory-informed practice, but also that there was an opportunity for delegates to reflect on own practice and share their experiences, thus embedding the learning within the organisational context. This would further aid learning and also develop relationships between delegates, thus meeting a key learning objective of the organisation which is to enhance collaborative working practices. Furthermore, delegates would become a body of staff with both a shared experience and a shared language, thus ensuring effective and coherent practices. This was facilitated by delegates continuously changing groups during the master classes to enable increased shared practice learning and to build relationships. In addition, a cohort size of 30-35 delegates is found to be optimum for this type of audience and facilitated learning approach.

One of the challenges for delegates is translating the new knowledge and skills back into the workplace. Here we drew on the work of Schön (1984, 1992), Revans (1982) and Kolb (1984) on experiential learning. As such the course was designed along the lines of Kolb's (1984) learning loop with periods of abstract conceptualisation (master class material and readings) interwoven with active experimentation (through the use of an extensive case study and online workbook), and reflection and observation (through action learning sets, development of a reflective practice piece and micro-reflective periods concluding each master class). Delegates received written formative and summative feedback on their reflective practice pieces which were submitted through the VLE.

An important consideration was that the programme design could be put to immediate use in the organisational workplace. In other words, delegates on the programme could immediately see how ideas, concepts, principles could be applied in their workplace to help them progress a personal business and management challenge. Here the role of the commissioning programme champion was central. The programme champion, through active engagement, sensitised the academic design team to the organisation's challenges and culture; facilitated the translation of academic theory back to senior members of the organisation to promote the programme internally; and engaged with the academic team throughout the design and delivery stages through a process of vigorous dialectic.

The design process also took into consideration the population of project managers who would potentially be participating in the programme. The programme was designed for middle to senior level project managers within the organisation. Potential delegates were identified and selected through an internal organisation nomination process based on their managerial grade, and previous internal leadership training completed.

Delivery and evolution

The organisation's commissioning programme champion and an appointed programme manager (also from the client organisation) sat in on all master class deliveries. This resulted in continuous involvement and suggestions for further improvement and alignment with the organisation's goals and objectives for the programme. An agile project management approach to the programme itself was utilised to incorporate the evolving content. The changes in content and delivery were more about refining the content and delivery to improve rather than drastically changing these. For example, providing more or less depth in the discussion of concepts, principles or techniques; integrating ideas across masterclasses more strongly; and emphasising the value to organisations of ideas presented and discusses. It must be noted that this required resilience from a teaching staff not used to such rapid content development cycles: a "healthy tension" existed between industry need and academic delivery. This healthy tension resulted for example in the adaptation of a leadership framework which eventually evolved to a leadership framework for complex project management.

In addition to the recurring input from the commissioning team, once the programme was "up and running" it also deliberately incorporated content from early cohorts' reflective practice work to provide tangible examples of the application of the theory within the client organisation. This provided evidence on: what theories were being integrated into the organisation to help delegates address or progress the challenges they faced; the value this had to the individual's development and the organisation; and other previously unidentified areas that needed attention within the organisation. This in turn prompted the commissioning programme champion to investigate further, and to feed the findings back to the academic team. Engaging with practice therefore enabled the academic team to advanced research knowledge. In turn, the programme content evolved with each review iteration. The academic team meanwhile incorporated, enhanced or reframed the theory to ensure that it was not only rigorous, but also relevant to the organisation's practice (as noted in the introduction).

Delegate and organisational journey

The organisation has been keeping track of benefits resulting from the programme using the Kirkpatrick Model for training evaluation (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 1994) and attests that the programme has resulted in increased confidence and motivation of the project leaders; improved project leadership capability; more consistency in the project management approach; more effective stakeholder engagement; better decision making; and improved capture of new revenue.

The delegates themselves have fed back their key "takeaways" as including a better understanding of themselves as leaders; the benefits of networking and sharing experiences across the business; the development of a community of practice; and the applicability of reflective practice, action learning, and the various theories and techniques presented on the programme.

In the words of one delegate:

"[The programme] is one of the best training programmes I have been on … with an excellent balance of academic, practical and shared learning experiences, supported by the reflective practice papers and action learning groups. This ensured that the learning was applied,

reflected on and lessons ploughed back in to deliver real tangible benefits in a way many other programmes fail to do" (delegate feedback, 2018).

Final reflections

The programme has now been delivered 12 times. On each occasion we gained valuable feedback from the delegates, along with regular commentary from the commissioning programme champion. The organisation considers it a success, as evidenced not only by an extension of the current deliverable programme, but also by the delivery of an adaptation for the very senior echelons of the company. The organisation is also considering more widespread adoption of the programme, as well as additional sister programmes.

Reflecting on our journey, and thinking about what necessitates the design of effective executive engagement, a number of insights emerge. The first is the fundamental role of the programme champion. Whilst the continual input to the content (in terms of delivery style, content material etc.) might have been difficult to deal with at times, it also ensured that the program experienced continuous improvement and thus acceptance within the organisation

The champion also had another key contribution, namely enabling the program to gain traction within the organisation. This, in conjunction with understanding the particularities facing the organisation, helped ensure that the organisation was willing to embrace the change. This often required talking with the most senior executives and this commitment was demonstrated by the CEO attending the senior echelon program as a delegate.

The challenges in terms of determining what material to present encompass factors such as: a) embracing novel ideas (but not untested ones); b) ensuring that what is presented builds on and augments other development programs within the organisation; and c) ensuring that the individual components add up to a coherent and easily comprehensible whole. In essence the programme seeks to assist in supporting not just today's senior project managers but also tomorrow's.

The process has also provided considerable insights into teaching executive education to project managers in terms of considering the design and flow of the material. Project-based organisations often comprise considerable numbers of engineers who are able to think systemically but are also very objective in their ontology. Encouraging them to consider the wider picture including issues relating to 'soft' factors is a revealing process for both the organisation and the academic team.

As noted above, the programme has been extended in terms of duration, management level and organisational division. The reflective practice assignments, feedback and reflections during and after the master classes, and the project champion's comments, provide a rich reservoir of material to further develop an understanding of what is necessary when teaching the project leaders of the future.

Next steps
Our next steps in terms of developing the paper include: a) complete analysis of reflective practice pieces to identify the key challenges project leaders face; b) complete analysis of benefits reports and impact of the programme to the organisation; c) complete analysis of leadership behaviours before and after programme uptake.

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