



## Moods and Narratives

Success in project management—the key process for managing change in organisations—lies with the soft skills (communicating, influencing, motivating, recognising and walking the talk). These are the conclusions of a study on project leadership undertaken in the USA, Canada and Australia.

The results of the study strongly suggest that a focus on human-centred practices for project management produces higher rates of success than the more ‘normal’ mechanistic and analytical practices. For example, the intangible “culture” is cited nearly 6 times more often than project methodologies and tools. Some of the key results;

- Human-Centred factors were cited 3 to 1 relative to analytical factors.
- Culture overall accounted for 40% of the factors cited.
- Organisational culture is responsible for one quarter of factors cited.
- Individuals’ leadership skills were cited 3 to 1 over analytical skills.
- Meetings were cited 11% of the time.
- Organisation-wide standard practices were cited only 9% of the time.
- Facilities and Physical assets account for only 4% of the factors cited.

The individual skills and practices most often cited as reasons for success were about mobilising people to act autonomously, coordinating their action through constant conversation; purposefully influencing people’s moods and producing coherent embodied project narratives which continuously adapt to situations.

### Organising success factors

The study grouped all the success factors into 4 groups. The first 3 are pretty standard:

- **People** – individuals with relevant embodied skills
- **Practice (or Process)** – a standardised way of producing some result (e.g. methodology, process

template, standard configuration etc.)

- **Physical assets (Technology)** – a physical object (e.g. material, hardware and software, facilities)

The final group is the one that is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the context of project management, but was overwhelmingly cited as by far the most important for success:

- **Intangibles** – factors that impacted the success if the project but were difficult to crisply define (e.g. cultures, and human relationships)

The authors subdivided this Intangibles grouping into 2 major subgroups:

#### • Relationships

How people felt about each other; that they knew who was doing what (roles); and the use of positional and social power.

#### • Culture as Moods and Narratives

‘Who we are and how we do things here.’

The mood that we ‘choose’ to be in at any give moment in time which filters our view of the world, dictates which emotions are available in the moment, and defines the range of actions ‘available’ to us.

Narratives—the language we use— influences our moods and vice versa and are ‘contagious’. It is thus imperative that we learn to control and use our moods and narratives in a positive and successful manner.

### What to do?

Most if not all of activity within companies today is run in project mode. Clearly an increase in the success rate of projects is perhaps THE key sustainable competitive advantage. Having people with strong human-centred skills with language, moods, coordination, and adaptation is therefore critical.

**Culture:** The research suggests that the culture of an organisation has a greater impact on project success than purely mechanical Project Management. So a focus on the correct ‘culture’ of both

the project and the organisation will have an immense impact on the success of all projects. An unsupportive environment will thwart the most masterful project manager or team.

**Leadership:** While having analytical or technical competence was deemed relevant (4%), people’s ability to invent, embody and influence others’ moods and narratives, as well as connecting on a human level, seems to be 3 times as important. Put another way, creative, integral and positively influencing leaders are key to the success.

**Conversations:** In a human-centred organisation, the action taken to influence moods narratives and human relationships is conversations. Yet with meetings cited for success only 11% of the time; this suggests that meetings are poorly run. A re-focus onto conversations and less rigid and autocratic meetings will have a dramatic effect on project success.

**Focus on Moods and Narratives:** The prevailing themes for moods in successful projects were: Resolve, Support, Trust, and Autonomy. The predominant narratives were: Vision (corporate and project), Strategy and Goals. And it was also clear that these narratives were not documented – the predominant experience was that people embodied them.

*Organisational Agility through Structures for Project Leadership. Kevin Suboski and Howard Renton, Suboski & Co, Inc, 2007.*

*Thanks to Learning Consortium member Jem Scanlan for his help with this article.*

### Implementing Moods and Narratives

New Directions and Learning Consortium have programmes which deliver these qualities in a project environment (*Winning Projects!*), personal leadership (*Focus on Influence*) and creating a positive culture through *Appreciative Inquiry*.

# Snippets

A collection of thought provokers and quotations ...

- ✂ “When a conductor forces the music out of his performers he gets what he deserves and nobody will remember him, when he allows his musicians to sing he achieves greatness.” *Luciano Pavarotti*
- ✂ “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” *Marcel Proust*
- ✂ “The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say 'I'. And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say 'I'. They don't think 'I'. They think 'we'; they think 'team'. They understand their job to be to make the team function. They accept responsibility and don't sidestep it, but 'we' gets the credit.... This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done.” *Peter. F Drucker*
- ✂ “Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.” *Woody Allen*
- ✂ Competitive advantage of the future is not going to be governed by available capital - but by our ability to utilise the intelligence and spirit of our people.” *Arie de Geus*
- ✂ “Worrying is praying for what you don't want.” *Bill Harris*
- ✂ “You only have to go as far as you can see; when you get there you will see more. But you have to know where you are going - and you have to know that you are going to get there.” *Bob Proctor*
- ✂ “We can't solve a paradox at the level of the paradox. We have to solve it at a higher level.” *Eliot Jacques*
- ✂ “You cannot outperform your self image. But you can change it.” *Maxwell Maltz*
- ✂ “They say that hard work never hurt anyone, but I figure why take the chance?” *Fred Thompson*
- ✂ “If you're losing good people, look to their manager ...the manager is the reason people stay and thrive in an organisation. And he is also the reason why people leave.” *Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman*
- ✂ “Sometimes a player's greatest challenge is coming to grips with his role on the team.” *Scottie Pippen*
- ✂ “Get rid of slogans.” *W Edwards Deming*

## Employers Dissatisfied With Results of Coaching

Despite coaching being a significant component of most company's leadership and management role, the actual results seem to contribute little to either their performance or job satisfaction, according to new research.

Nearly 700 mid-level employees in North America, Europe and Asia were asked to evaluate coaching's impact. Fewer than one in four respondents said coaching contributed significantly to their performance, while a clear majority reported slight, little or no impact:

Job performance:	
Significant contribution	23%
Slight improvement	38%
Little or no impact	22%
Negative impact	3%

Likewise, just 20% indicated coaching had contributed significantly to their job satisfaction; in fact 10% thought it had actually diminished it.

Job satisfaction:	
Significant contribution	20%
Slight improvement	32%
Little or no impact	22%
Negative impact	10%

BlessingWhite CEO Christopher Rice said. “The findings should prompt management to address the evident shortcomings of coaching by managers, make them more accountable, do more to reinforce it, and even offer tangible incentives.”

The survey also found that 73% of those participating had attended coaching training. Given the findings, one has to question what the training consisted of, and what was the follow up or implementation success.

There is no doubt that coaching, properly implemented, creates significant results in performance – something other focused studies and evaluations have found. What this broad survey identifies is that these excellent results are not the norm. Organisations seem to be paying lip service to the effective implementation of the process.

Concludes Rice: “We see missed opportunities to use coaching to boost performance, leverage individual contribution and align employees with business goals.”

*Blessingwhite Inc / HR.com*

## Salary Not Important to Students Seeking Jobs

Award-winning research has confirmed some of the priorities of the current generation of new workers ("Generation Y"), which may be surprising to Generation X, and especially baby-boomers.

Asking today's business students what they want from employers when considering first jobs, students did not rank compensation as the most important factor when accepting their first jobs. In fact it was ranked in sixth place.

### Top ten factors business students consider when choosing employers:

1. Opportunities for advancement
2. Good training opportunities, and the chance to develop new skills
3. Good people to work with
4. Good people to report to
5. Challenging work
6. Good initial starting salary
7. Work - life balance
8. Job security
9. Opportunities to make a personal impact
10. Good health and benefits plan

*The next generation at work: Business students views, values and job search strategy implications. Prof Ed Ng / HR.com*

### PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

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