Leadership, beyond project management

Prudence A Clarke is the founder and developer of the PLACE programme.

She is an HR Adviser to multi-disciplinary organisations, and specialises in organisational development and learning.

Why the need?

The historical and ongoing confusion, misunderstanding and assumptions made surrounding management and leadership and their differences continues. Management consultants, academies, universities, all have their own views, models and plethora of books, articles et al developed over many, many years and are a strong indication of what we all believe is correct – at a given time. “At a given time” can be a genuine cause for scepticism; whilst the need to address the changing environment is required, fundamental behaviours to achieve a given outcome are relatively static.

Understanding behaviours has proved a significant change to understanding the differences between the manager and the leader; that of process and behaviour. Identifying processes is scientifically relatively “easy”; making tangible “behaviours” is not. Recognising the need, however, is an excellent start to initiating the research. The key drivers for the research emanated from a clear business need from clients, initially within the construction industry –
that of achieving project profitability and a dissatisfaction with project management, but not really comprehending why. This was obviously an issue with both public and private sector projects and anecdotal evidence through delayed, uneconomic projects and national and international controversies, provided substantial confirmation. Using the then ‘Egan Report’\(^1\) as a starting point, and tracking government initiatives following this report, provided further evidence that clinging onto status quo and the focus on project management simply did not provide the solutions. The breakthrough came from the initial Project Leadership Forum in 2000, following consultancy work to find a solution to project delivery problems.

To quote Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, during the development of the PLACE (Project Leadership Assessment for the Commercial Environment) Psychometric, “there has been a great deal of speculation about the personality of leaders. Historians, political scientists, novelists and business people as much as psychologists have speculated on the characteristics of great, as well as failed and derailed, leaders. Leadership has also proved difficult to define though a few published chapters suggested that leadership can be defined in terms of the ability to build, motivate and maintain high performing teams, groups, departments and organisations.”

**Finding the solutions**

The original Project Leadership Forum 2000 held in London over a 2-day period, with key industry leaders, professional bodies (including the Association of Project Management “APM”) and selected representatives from relevant universities (i.e. Reading, UCL) identified and consolidated 40 attributes the various mixed-working groups considered essential to successful delivery. Future biennial project leadership forums using a similar format, produced a total of 96 attributes, which were subsequently analysed,
debated and rationalised through senior partner/director action research
groups over a number of years into what are now recognised as the PLACE
seven plus twelve (7+12) project leadership facets and behaviours.

Having achieved tangibility, the next evolutionary stage was to practically
apply the identified facets and behaviours throughout projects to provide
benefits at both a macro and micro level using both qualitative and
quantitative methodologies to presenting data clarity, accuracy and
importantly, face validity.

The discerning client research group sought incisive proprietary tools,
techniques and development programmes that identified, assessed and
prepared project managers and directors for leadership. The programmes had
to be timeless, universal and of substance that would stand the test of time
bringing about positive change within the project operating environment.

The results – in 3 stages

1. Identifying the project leader (intrinsic)

The PLACE Psychometric was commissioned for development with Dr Tomas
Chamorro-Premuzic, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Goldsmiths College.
Using his brief during the development of the PLACE psychometric provides a
rare insight into the philosophy behind development and over 100 years of
leadership research. The material also, quite rightly, justifies the quality of the
mechanism supporting the psychometric.

“1. Item selection (rationale): the seven project leadership facets were
selected on the basis of a) systematic review of the literature (and following up
Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham’s, 2004 leadership review)², b) taxonomic
position of leadership with regard to other organisationally relevant
constructs (such as intelligence, confidence, emotional intelligence and social
intelligence), c) focus group, interviews and rank order data on the more specific construct of project leadership (provided by PCR). We were able to provide both peripheral and core items for the first version in line with the three criteria specified above, we have been able to select a total of 60 items that are consistent with a) state of the art trait leadership approaches, b) related (though distinct) differential constructs (notably personality and intelligence), and c) pilot results and response grid (mainly non-parametric analysis of ranked attributes) available from the PCR data base.

As a result, our items show high face validity and correspond to a robust theoretical as well as methodological framework. A priori, we predict these items (or the ones to be retained) to load on different, but oblique, composites, as well as an overall, individual, score of project leadership which allows employers and managers to identify potential for project leadership at an early stage, and maximise both the prediction of performance and sound allocation of resources.

a. Systematic review of the literature b. Correlates of leadership (related constructs): c. Based on the results of previous interviews, focus groups, and ranked-ordered attributes provided by PCR, the analyses suggested the following traits would play an important role in determining the structure of project leadership.”

PLACE is a 54-item, un-timed, self-report, psychometric inventory that assesses individuals’ potential for project leadership in the construction environment. Questions are answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly agree” (SD = 1) to “strongly disagree” (SD = 5), and refer to work-related statements, dispositions, beliefs, and preferences that represent the individual in his/her everyday work environment. PLACE can be used to obtain an overall, quantitative, project leadership score (in both points and percentages) as well as 7-primary facet scores. The primary facets provide information on the individual’s leadership style, in particular whether and to what extent he/she is pragmatic, creative, positively intolerant, group-
oriented, stable, communicator, and motivated. Descriptive and conceptual details of these facets can be found below:

**Primary facet scores:** can range from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) with an arithmetic mean of 2.50 (standard deviation = .75). Some primary facet scores are “oblique” or positively inter-correlated. For instance, pragmatic, creative, and positive intolerance tend to load on the same composite, whereas motivated, communicator and stable tend to load on another.

**Overall PLACE scores:** can range from 7 (lowest) to 35 (highest) with an arithmetic mean of 19.50 (standard deviation = 2.07). This score is also expressed in terms of percentages, where the mean is 50.00 and the standard deviation is 5.00. Percentage scores above 65% indicate great potential for project leadership, whilst percentage scores higher than 75% indicate excellent potential.

PLACE is the product of a six-year PCR academic research enterprise working with Dr Chamorro-Premuzic (Goldsmiths, University of London). PLACE was designed according to a state-of-the-art literature review, which examined more than one-hundred years of empirical and theoretical findings on leadership and leadership assessment, and a large-scale qualitative pilot study that identified and determined the relevance of traditional leadership facets in the construction industry. PLACE was validated empirically employing robust psychometric techniques and state-of-the-art statistical methods (Principal Component Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Structural Equation Modelling), using large samples (N >200 < 500) of construction industry employees. All levels of seniority and positions were examined, and the structure of PLACE was replicated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Validation of PLACE was achieved through other-ratings, expert and consensual scoring, as well as in terms of discriminant predictive validity studies.
PLACE is a dynamic tool for the assessment of comparative employee profiles on standardised and structured dimensions. It is an ideal complement and enhancement for open or semi-structured interviews, in that it provides a quantitative indicator of an individual’s potential on the key dimensions of project leadership. PLACE can be administered online, via e-mail, or in the traditional paper-and-pencil version. It can also be used for self- and other-reports (or combining both methods). All scoring, feedback, and interpretation is standardised, systematised and provided by PCR through the automation provided by an authorised associate, Pulse-check.

2. Assessing the project leader (extrinsic)

Having identified the fundamental leadership facets, expanding knowledge of the individual with regard to specific project leadership behaviours and attributes through rigorous, in-depth assessment to provide an overall picture of the individual and a sound basis for selection and/or development.

The PLACE Profiler, developed again over a period of six years, analyses and provides a synopsis of the individual aligned with 12 project leadership attributes identified by successful leaders in industry. From the initial Forum 2000, a series of senior partner, director action research workshops were initiated, taking the 96 identified attributes and behaviours identified during the various Forum, for rationalisation to the critical aspects of project leadership to bring about successful delivery of projects. Dr Michael Murray of Strathclyde University and Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (to ensure continuity between both identification and assessment) contributed to this development; however Nadia Bettega was instrumental in preparing the foundations for delivery and ultimately, the end product.

To use the work of John Rust and Susan Golombok, “... interviews when used for selection are also psychometric procedures. That is, they need to be reliable, valid, standardised and free from bias”. The Profiler was designed with this strongly at the forefront during the developmental stage. Further,
“when human experts are interviewed on how they make decisions about people, it is noticeable that much of their judgemental process is based on estimations of the person’s personality and aptitude in general, and not on the very specific pieces of performance defined by the job specification itself.” [4]

The PLACE Profiler includes a semi-structured in-depth interview lasting 45-60 minutes. This qualitative element can either be carried out on a one to one basis, or in the form of a panel interview. It seeks to maximize the validity and reliability of the findings of the psychometric test through "methodological triangulation"; that is, by gathering information simultaneously by means of different techniques.

Questions in the interview are semi-structured and generally non-directive to facilitate the respondents’ own meaning frame. Specifically developed to collect information and data in a relatively short time, this approach also allows interviewers to undertake their own analysis (which can be compared between interviews and interviewers) with an explicit focus on local experiences, values, knowledge and expertise.

The Profiler examines views and experiences of various aspects of project leadership in the context of the project operating environment. Responses can be compared over time and across interviews, allowing for training in any deficient areas of project leadership. The interview themes include:

- Definitions and understanding of leadership
- Knowledge and beliefs about leadership
- Experiences of leadership attributes
- Evaluations of leadership qualities

A coding frame is drawn up and developed by close examination of the full set of transcriptions. The interviews are then analysed using a computer package Atlas-ti which will allow the prevalence and substance of each theme/attribute to be ascertained. If any interviewee lacks a particular quality, this will be
identified in the analysis and training can be tailored accordingly, providing appropriate support for development outlined below.

3. Developing the project leader

Having identified and assessed the leader, the results from both psychometric and profiler provide sound data upon which to invest in either selection or development.

Our differentiation, based upon sound human resource practice, dictated that not only did we provide sound identification and assessment practice, we also too took a pragmatic holistic approach in providing supportive training and development. When working with behavioural change, the sensitive and sometimes challenging transitions require the nurturing and expertise of outstanding tutors. Our careful selection of tutors provide an ideal learning and transition environment, during both the 5-day Project Leadership Challenge, or the 1-day Workshops.

Attaining specific behavioural characteristics and the motivation for change is a complex psychological process. Learning from experience (skills, knowledge, attitudes for example) on the job or within a learning environment, provides significant results and is the basis for both the 5-day and 1-day programmes.

The 5-day Project Leadership Challenge (restricted to 12 delegates) is a 5 Module learning programme. As all competent human resource development practitioners intrinsically know, adult learners must be motivated in order to learn; understanding the delegates therefore before the 5-day programme is of paramount importance; in addition to assessing their learning needs. An integral part of all PLACE learning programmes consolidates the seven facets (Psychometric) with the twelve behaviours (Profiler) of the project leader and is the focus for development. It is equally important that the tutors are aware of and recognise each individual delegate’s knowledge and experience, if learning and subsequently change, is to occur. The tutors also embrace the
social learning approach as a powerful influence in shaping project leadership behaviours within the group whilst stretching the shared intellect as opposed to exceeding the individual intellectual capacity, which can prove extremely dangerous.

Whilst the cognitive focus is on developing project leadership behaviours, it is not the intention of the programme to enforce a model, dictate the way delegates should behave, or based purely upon the behaviourist model of learning, more one of providing scope for cognition, individual choice and discretion for change. Providing scope translates into providing the environment for knowledge (tutor stimulus), practice (exercise, delegate response), reflection (space) and change (nurture and reinforcement). In simple terms, using single and double loop learning as the underlying philosophy.

The basic principles evolving from the Action Research Group (ARG) were that the project leader was fundamentally responsible for an organisation analogous with, for example, an MD or CEO. An interesting and astute observation however, from a delegate from the Notting Hill Housing Group, attending the 2007 “Profitability through Project Leadership” workshop, was that whilst this is so, the major difference was the wherewithal to be able to operate at this level, whilst running multi-projects or whilst moving from one project to another often without an official hierarchy or authority – fully recognised within the 7+12 attributes. Another important aspect when developing the programme was the acceptance that there would be a broad and diverse range of delegates – from the 25 year old looking for a fast-track to project leadership – to the 55+ age group who either need coping strategies during a complex and challenging project, or to gain additional confidence in existing knowledge and expertise. Taking an extract from Rupert Brown’s Group Processes, “It is not who you are that is important to leadership success, it is how you behave .... argued Lippitt and White (1943) in one of the earliest and most influential studies of leadership” \[5\] and stands the test of time.
The 5 Modules

Module 1: “From Manager to Leader”

Recognises the psychological transition from the process of project management to the behaviour of the accountable leader. There has been much debate about what is a manager and what is a leader. Project management, historically, focuses on processes, systems and delivery; leadership is generally relegated to “soft” skills, or “conflict” management, or a heavy reliance on “leadership” styles. Useful though these are, it assumes a manager can lead and anecdotal evidence of failed projects (major ones at that) suggests the danger of making these assumptions. The 12 behaviours and attributes identified by ‘ARG’ are critically business oriented and covered in Modules 2, 3, 4 and 5 below. We have a tendency to use (glibly) expressions such as “high performance teams”, “profitability”, the project management mantra of “on time delivery, to budget and specification”, and so on, without necessarily analysing the psychology behind the expectations or the feasibility of the term ‘success’.

Module 2: “Profitability through Project Leadership”

Visionary | Strategist | Commercial Acumen | Integrity.

The ARG raised the issue that project ‘managers’ based upon anecdotal evidence in failed high profile budgets, appear to operate as a team member rather than a leader in a highly reactive way; responding to situations, rather than anticipating the issues in establishing a clear collective vision as the ‘Visionary’. Equally, driving the project to success is leadership and behavioural through the team, not merely a plan through critical path analysis and must be integral to the project vision, setting realistic challenges, stretching the commerciality capability, and financial accountabilities. Profitability through project leadership and all participants in the project team is an exciting, achievable proposition.
The overwhelming high percentage response from all the participants during the ARG workshops was the importance of 'integrity'; whilst its interpretation can vary between project stakeholders and organisations. Despite this variance, the project leader can influence project participants through their own behaviour and in setting standards through their collective vision and strategic implementation; confidently overcoming, realistically, the sometimes moral dilemmas.

**Modules 3 and 4: “Leading through Uncertainty” and “Decision-making”**

Panoramic perception | Realist | Judgement | Decisive/decision-maker.

Project decisions and decision-making, without the necessary hierarchy or authority, as anecdotal evidence from failed projects indicates, was a critical issue the ARG were keen to remedy. Interestingly, ‘panoramic perception’ an innovative notion identified by a senior project member of staff at LandSecurities Group interlinked well with the other PLACE grouped attributes identified by other members of the ARG at different workshops. It was fascinating, on reflection, that behaviours prioritised by the individual ARG members culturally matched their way of working, for example, ‘realist’ - EC Harris; ‘commercial acumen’ - Urban Splash, and so on.

**Module 5: “Building the Team”**

Team-builder | Empowering | Motivational | Politician

The ‘ARG’ recognised the project “manager” had a tendency to ride roughshod over the teams involved in the project and could quote incidents which were not reflective of their own organisations. Sara Fox, whilst New Building Director, Swiss Re responsible for the successful completion of the iconic “Gherkin” building in the City of London (and a contributory to the PLACE research) is an excellent example of the ideal “project leader”. The focus on
systems and processes, contractual obligations, KPIs et al did not necessarily address the needs of the project team (and their organisations) in achieving what she saw as “rewards for all” as an integral part of the team-building objectives whilst creating an environment for functional accountability and nurturing talented individuals.

The 1-day Project Leader Workshops concisely convert Modules 2, 3, 4 and 5 into 3 separate learning sessions and are restricted to 30 delegates creating flexibility for delegates who do not need the full 5-day Project Leadership Challenge programme.

- “Profitability through Project Leadership”
- “Risk, Judgement and Decision-making”
- “Building the Multi-Functional Project Team”

In essence development and learning at the intrinsic and extrinsic level; inextricably integral and interestingly (although not planned) interdependent because enlightenment evolved organically over a number of years with leading academics and recognised practitioners – as summarised below:

**Ongoing development**

**Coaching and Mentoring**

There are almost as many coaching models as there are authors – interesting though they are, there is no specific PLACE model for coaching; more one of -

1. offering support during the transference of learning, post-programme
2. facilitation of behavioural change
3. gaining agreement to action-centred targets, rather than performance analysis
4. ongoing development of skills and expertise
5. cultivating motivation, ownership and responsibility
6. building confidence and self-knowledge

Similarly, there is no specific PLACE model for mentoring, except to
differentiate from what the coach performs; therefore the Mentor -

7. focuses on the longer-term development, potential, personal growth
   and career
8. guides through political machinations and cultures
9. stimulates innovation and creativity of thought
10. fosters networking and alliances
11. helps to clarify vision and strategy
12. promotes self-reliance, adaptability and exploration.

The PLACE programme offers the distinction between coach and mentor
backed-up by the provision of both expert coaches and mentors with practical
hands-on experience of ‘running’ successful and not so successful projects
combined with academic rigour relevant to complexity and culture of the
project.

Alternatively, an internal coaching and mentoring development programme is
delivered by Professor Adrian Furnham, an organisational and applied
psychologist and Professor of Psychology at University College London, who
has contributed to both the Psychometric and 5-day Project Leadership
Challenge; not least in selecting the best tutors to deliver the programme.

**Biennial Project Leadership Forum**

The biennial forum raises awareness of the benefits of project leadership at
both macro and micro levels and is attended by 250 delegates from all
industry-sectors ranging from CEO to senior project staff. The Forum purpose
also keeps abreast of the changing environment – assessing and challenging
the 7+12 attributes, rather than acceptance of status quo (an inherent
attribute of the leader).
To conclude, at this stage a number of initiatives to ensure we keep the programme relevant to different project environments (from film/media to petrochemical), allows enquirers to complete the psychometric as part of the ongoing pilot and research process.

If you would like to join the next Project Leadership Forum, or attend one of the learning programmes, visit the PLACE website: www.ProjectLeaders.com

Update

Since this paper was written, PLACE has become Project Leaders Worldwide and the psychometric test is available online for everyone to use. Try it here: www.ThePsychometricTest.com

References

2 A Furnham/T Chamorro-Premuzic, 2004 Leadership Review, British Journal of Psychology