

## Leading teams on major projects

### **At a glance**

*Major property and transport infrastructure projects are uniquely challenging. They need strong, effective leadership to build a team culture, driven to succeed.*

Major infrastructure projects are exciting to lead - they're highly visible and strategically important to both clients and project partners. Effectively leading these projects is uniquely challenging, and critically important to meeting organisational objectives.

The key challenge of these projects is the momentum they create because of their sheer size and complexity - it takes a focussed and determined effort to get them moving, and it can be very difficult to change their direction if they veer off track. The challenge for the project leader is to harness this momentum to realise an effective, collaborative, team-based project culture which enables the team to find the right solutions as problems arise.

### **A leader's role**

A project leaders' role is multi-faceted. They're obviously responsible for leadership, but they're also relied on to coach staff to enhance their role on the project, to moderate conflict resolution and provide a calming influence during high stress periods.

Central to this role is planned and deliberate action to develop a positive project culture as well as frequent, face to face communication – with the team, senior personnel, key project partners and stakeholders. It's essential to convey consistent principles for decision making and work collaboratively to define and agree on project processes.

### **Their team**

Delivering infrastructure projects needs large teams equipped with a wide range of skills, experience levels, expertise and perspectives. They'll have come from different projects, different organisations with different cultures, and they'll have worked under different contract structures, each with their own approach and attitude.

These teams are often formed in a short space of time and right from the start are under pressure to demonstrate early results. In the early months, in this type of working environment, it's critical to maintain a steady hand, engage widely and develop a positive project culture. However, because of the size of the team, and the complexity of the relationships within it, a period of storming and norming can be expected, and any change or initiative can take months to take effect. It's important to resist the pressure to push too hard, and focus on making steady progress towards building a more effective team.

## Creating project culture is an art

### At a glance

*Embed the right team culture as soon as possible to meet your business objectives.*

The project team will respond to a consistent message backed by the appropriate action, but the size and complexity of the team requires patience - culture is built over time.

The project leader on a major project has a strong influence on the project direction, but they by no means control it. It's critically important that they work with the project partners to understand their needs and drivers, bringing them on the journey to ensure a successful project outcome.

The first step is agreeing on and being clear about the sort of culture required for the successful delivery of the project. What behaviours are needed from the team? What will a successful outcome look like? Which is the most important factor - time, cost, quality, public profile or something else entirely? How should the team be seen by stakeholders?

Capturing the vision for the project and the guiding principles for the team in a project charter can be useful, but is not essential to achieving the objective. Generally each leader should choose an appropriate approach which suits their style and conveys the message in a clear and consistent manner.

Collaboration workshops are commonplace in industry with alliances, managing contractor and EPCM contracting structures growing in popularity. They're great in practice, but are often held too early, before the relevant project phase starts in earnest. While an initial meeting to agree on the desired project culture can be beneficial, we recommend holding the workshop about 6 – 9 months into the phase, when the initial storming and norming periods have run their course and the project partners are clearer on how they'd like to build a better team.

## Communicate effectively

Email and project communication platforms such as Aconex have massively increased the efficiency of project work over the last decade. However, nothing beats face to face interactions which are critically important to communicate project principles effectively and provide and receive feedback, particularly when the project team is spread across a number of locations. This level of engagement also allows you to develop trust which is critical when dealing with complex and/or difficult issues.

The usual principles of good communication apply where written communication is needed – be clear, succinct and only send it to those who actually need to read it. On a major project, the consequences of sending out poorly worded or confusing communications can be significantly greater, as is the potential for important information to be lost in the noise of misdirected comms.

Communicating and celebrating the team's successes is really important, particularly during the early phases of construction where the issues can be many and the milestones far away. It's easy to focus on what's going wrong, but receiving communications about the project and team achievements makes people feel appreciated and gives the stakeholders a real sense of progress - which in turn helps in building a positive team culture.

A fantastic idea introduced by one of our team members on a recent project was the distribution of 'Good News Friday' - a two page summary of the week's achievements. Great feedback was received from a range of stakeholders, and it was also used to provide regular updates to senior executives. A real sense of camaraderie resulted amongst the site team as they strived to get their work mentioned in GNF.

### **Consistent decision-making**

When delivering a major infrastructure project it's impractical and inefficient for the project leader to be directly involved in all aspects of the project. Good leaders rely heavily on their team to make effective decisions and to keep them informed of developing risks and issues. It's therefore important that team members are mentored effectively, able to make good decisions, and are clear about the principles that should be applied when they need to give direction.

Consistency is essential to building a project culture where effective decisions are the norm. Being clear on the principals behind your decisions and explaining these to the team will ensure reliable results, more often.

### **Work collaboratively to agree on and implement the right processes**

Bringing together diverse experiences and backgrounds on a major infrastructure project presents a fantastic opportunity to leverage new and different management ideas, and to work with some of the best minds in industry to develop better processes to deliver successful outcomes.

It's important that a project leader works closely with project partners to develop these processes. Be clear on what the fundamental requirements are and where flexibility exists for improvement. For example, most organisations have financial information that needs to be reported in a particular format, and the process developed needs to deliver the required level of detail. Be prepared to listen to new ideas and perhaps change the way things get done.

On another recent project, earned value management was introduced to integrate program, cost, and technical performance measurements. Although this approach created significant benefits for the client it was a new concept for the contractor - working together it took ten months before it could be executed effectively. On the other hand, the contractor also introduced a cost management system which significantly improved the efficiency of project processes and delivered more usable information.

### **Engage with project partners at the executive level**

Regular and open communication with the senior personnel of a project is clearly a necessity on large projects. But it's also important to understand that many of these people will have dual responsibilities - to the project and to their own employers. They'll be engaged with the team on the day to day management of the project, but it's their executive staff that will make critical decisions on resourcing, commercial responses and dispute resolution, and these decisions can potentially, and significantly, impact project outcomes.

Therefore it's good practice to engage and develop appropriate relationships at the executive level of the project partners. This initiative will ensure alignment of objectives, allow the identification of common ground on commercial interests and facilitate the development of a shared understanding of requirements and potential challenges on the project. This can reduce pressure on project resources, and provide a strong basis where issues that do come up can be worked through more effectively.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Major infrastructure projects are strategically important to the project partners and professionally exciting for the staff involved. They bring with them a unique set of challenges in a complex environment. While they can be technically complicated, its relationship management and a positive project culture which is most important in delivering optimised project outcomes.

Successfully managing these projects requires a considered, systematic approach, engagement at multiple levels, and being flexible to new ideas and innovations that only a truly diverse team can bring.