

UK Project Management Round Up



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INTRODUCTION

The summer is a traditionally poor month for news and project management news is no exception. It is not that project has stopped, after all there are many running – not least the Paralympics. But the news is about the delivery of the output rather than the process that got there in the first place. So this month, I propose to look at some other aspects of the project process and will take a brief look at leadership, supply chain management and people.

LEADERSHIP



Andrew Strauss photo ©Gallo Images

The cricketing world, at that part of it in UK, was shocked last month to read that the charismatic captain of the England team had resigned. **Andrew Strauss** had played 100 times for England including 50 times as Captain. He cited poor form and what he called ‘waning powers as a batsman’ as the drivers for his resignation. You might wonder what this has to do with Project Management. Despite his successes – he transformed English cricket in attitude, fielding and team cohesion, hence taking them to the top of the World Rankings – he has departed and here is a lesson for project managers.

Strauss has been widely praised by a Press Corps all too prone to denigrate and criticise any perceived shortcoming. The cause for this unusual praise stems not from his undoubted achievements as a batsman or as an articulate spokesman for his sport but from the respect generated by his leadership and here lie some lessons for the Project Manager.

In an editorial comment in 'The i' newspaper, **Amol Rajan** drew attention to the personal characteristics he saw as contributing to Strauss the leader. These qualities are reminiscent of John Adair's concept of leadership (see www.johnadair.co.uk for details) and consist, according to Rajan, of honesty, character, education, communication, hard work and personal approach. He give a number of examples:

- Honesty – evidenced by his acknowledgement of a loss of form and being past his best;
- Character – he took on the challenge of managing the England team when they were at a low ebb and by a combination of personal qualities and example showed what could be achieved;
- Education – this really underpins everything as what he learned at school and university seems to have made a significant contribution to several personal competences;
- Communication – there are many examples of his ability as a communicator. The point here is that having a vision is insufficient as you cannot take people with you if you don't tell them, all, where you are going and how you will get there;
- Hard Work – work harder than every member of your team because no team can carry a lazy leader;
- Personal Approach – Strauss knew that people respond to the trust placed on them and the opportunity to perform. He identified individual strengths and nurtured them. He also emphasised the personal aspect with hand written letters to everyone who played in his last match.

One other aspect, attributed to Australian cricketing legend **Richie Benaud**, is that captaincy is 90% luck. There is little evidence that luck played much part in Strauss's role as captain and there shouldn't be much in the role of most Project Managers – remember the response by South African golfer **Gary Player** – I find that the more I practice, the luckier I become.

Supply Chain Management

One of the frequently neglected aspects of project management, Supply Chain Management has become a focus for UK as the award of the West Coast Mainline railway franchise to First Group develops into a major row. The process to select the new franchisee took something like 18 months of scrutiny and verification by HN Treasury. The results have now been challenged by **Sir Richard Branson**, whose Virgin Trains lost the contract. Sir Richard has called for the contract completion to be delayed while the House of Commons reviews the process.

While at first sight, this might seem reasonable, there is a notable lack of expertise in the Commons with very few Members of Parliament having any kind of business experience so quite how additional scrutiny can help resolve the issue is not clear. Many informed observers question the validity of Branson's challenge, claiming that the current franchise is the worst performing rail operator on the whole UK network.

Meanwhile, the whole of the Government's procurement processes have come under challenge as the British Chambers of Commerce claim that a complete overhaul is needed. **John Longworth**, the head of the British Chambers of Commerce called for more people with corporate experience to enter Whitehall. In a recent press briefing he said: "We need a paradigm shift in the way in which the Government thinks about what it's there for and what it does. The Government should be facilitating enterprise. All departments have to align themselves behind the economy as being the priority." He expressed concern that only 150 MPs out of 650 have any business experience and that only 30 have a science degree.

While he declined to comment on whether the decision to award the West Coast Main Line franchise to FirstGroup was correct, Mr Longworth said that the government procurement process needed to be overhauled. "It is an administrative process rather than a commercial process. The people who are undertaking public procurement aren't skilled commercial people," he said. "It's a tick-box exercise. You would do far better if you just got a whole bunch of Tesco buyers in."

According to the Times, Mr Longworth claims that the introduction of people with business skills would benefit taxpayers and companies because the public procurement process "tends to favour" very large companies that are able to employ departments to go through the bureaucratic process to win the contracts. "The process needs people who are skilled at getting the best deals for the taxpayer. And it needs to be simplified so it can be opened out to a wider group of business who will be equally capable of high quality services at the right price."

People

After the spotlight on the Olympics last month, attention has shifted to the Paralympics. Difficult though it is to ignore the amazing achievements of the athletes competing in the largest ever, and most well supported Paralympic, the spotlight should fall on the Project Managers who adapted the facilities, prepared and executed the outstanding opening ceremony and generally did an amazing job of making sure these Games operate smoothly.

Much has been said about the legacy of both the Olympics and the Paralympics (see for instance the debate on Linked In). Quite a lot of what has been said is simple euphoria, a desire to see the heights achieved over the last month carry on beyond the Games themselves. The view seems to be that the Games are the final objective and that it all ends when the athletes depart. However, the so -called 'legacy' has been carefully

planned and extends for some 20 years beyond the present. So there is a considerable project management challenge for some time to come, and that will not simply be confined to the construction aspects.

I heard one reporter on a national broadcast medium praising the people at the lowest level for the success of the Games, as though they were solely responsible. While these people had a critical role to play, the real heroes are the myriad of planners, projects control staff and others involved in the project management, and principally the project managers who really made the games work.

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