

## **What can Project Managers learn from Nurses?**

By Lunga Msengana

One Sunday afternoon, my family and I were just relaxing, and meditating on the morning's sermon in church. Although I had quite a number of things to do, I decided to take it easy and spend some quality time with the family, ahead of another busy week. Without even realising it, my son (15 months old at the time) and I dozed off in bed – perhaps we were overtired. When we woke up I noticed that he was shaking. At first I did not pay attention to it, thinking that it was just his body movements from waking up. My wife pointed out to me that this was not normal, as the shaking, which we recognised as convulsions, continued for more than three minutes. During that time we felt as if we were losing him – a feeling probably partly due to our first-time parenting experience.

Once the convulsions lessened, and he was sort of stabilising, we decided to rush him to the nearest hospital so that he could receive medical attention. The journey to the hospital made up some of the tensest moments of our lives as parents. I must have broken every road rule in the book (which I must say I'm not proud about), to ensure that my son got to the hospital alive. When we got there, he was thoroughly examined in the intensive care unit for some hours, and then admitted to the paediatric ward.

We were not aware that our son might be admitted for more than four days, so we were under the impression that it was going to be just one night, and then the following day he might be discharged. The doctors explained to us that children's bodies do not handle high temperatures very well, and that is why at times when their body temperature reaches a certain degree, they almost go into a state of shock – which is why they experience fits. Because of this, they would have to monitor his temperature until it dropped to an acceptable level. Certain medications would have to be administered, in order to help the temperature to drop. Moreover, the air conditioning would have to be at a very low level, so as to accelerate the process as well.

My son's body temperature was like a roller coaster, and we ended up staying for a longer period than anticipated, but thankfully he soon made a full recovery. There is not much to keep you busy in a hospital, after you have read all the magazines and watched the TV channels, so you tend to notice a number of things that are happening around you, and form certain conclusions. For me as a project management practitioner, I asked myself: What can I learn from these nurses to whom I have given control over the health of my son? To my surprise, I discovered quite a few things that we can learn from them.

Nurses are often accused of being rude to patients. It is said that this is because they are not being suitably remunerated, and why most of them are not truly dedicated to their profession. Some say that nursing should be a calling and not merely a job. Others state that many of the world's governments are not taking proper care of people in this profession, which is why there is low morale among many nurses. With all these

comments, and also others not mentioned here, about nurses, from what I experienced at the hospital there is still a great deal to learn from them as project managers.

As you know, nurses work in shifts. One group works the day shift, and another the night shift. What I noticed was that the nurses do not just abandon the ward because their shift is over. The ones who are about to leave their shift have a joint session with the ones who are about to work on the new shift. At first I was kind of puzzled by this gathering, until they came close to where we sitting, and I could pick up on some of the conversation. The nurse would give a full report about his or her observations of the child, and sort of warn other nurses about what to watch out for. The child's health is analysed to the last detail, including factors such as blood pressure, temperature, blood samples and response to medication – to name but a few. When the new nurse takes over, she knows the health history of the child, and is analysing the situation as the shift progresses. When she finishes the shift, she will do a report among other nurses regarding the child, and decisions for the next shift will be determined by this briefing.

In project management we often lack these kinds of handover techniques that are practised by nurses. You will notice that at times, in many organisations, when a project is troubled and management feel that the responsible project manager is running it into the ground, they decide to give the project to someone else. In such cases there are no proper handover procedures carried out, and management wants to feel content that there is someone else more competent who is running the project. The new project manager may also struggle because he might not have all the information at his disposal to ensure that he can restore the situation to normal. He still depends on other team members to work with him, so that they can succeed in the project.

If the team members were friends with the old project manager, they might not always be willing to dish out information to the new person. On the other hand, the new project manager may not necessarily succeed in the project, because the original problem was not the old project manager, and perhaps the systems within the organisation might be the actual obstacle to success. Many academics have said that if you put people under the same system, chances are they might achieve the same results, or portray similar behaviour. Proper handovers can assist organisations from extending the period of failure, in such cases. Merely sacking the project manager may not necessarily work – in fact, it might create more problems.

As part of possibly several project life-cycle stages, the handover phase forms part of the process. This is common to all projects, be they the implementation of a hardware or software system, the building of a power station, or even an election campaign, to name but a few. The handover process is one that is at times not given the proper attention that it deserves by many project practitioners. It is understandable that some projects stretch for long durations, and that towards the end of the project, people may often lose interest in other processes such as handover or lessons learnt – especially when there is enough evidence that the new system works.

However, this is where matters can go wrong for an organisation. Because the project team might not have documented all the details during the project phase, the maintenance team might struggle to find their way when there is a fault. If the system is

critical to the survival of an organisation, this might mean a massive potential loss of profit.

One of the elements that impressed me about nurses is the manner in which they handle their documentation. We might accuse many hospitals of being “backward”, since they do not necessarily rely on “hi-tech” when it comes to recording patients’ details, and some are still using paper-based techniques. The bottom line is that their system works, and it enables them to make effective decisions for any patient.

Everyone who is tasked with the responsibility of taking patients’ information, does it very well, and this can be used by other members of the team. As I say, all the useful information is in the file, and the medical practitioner is able to look at the chain of events from the day the patient was admitted, and make effective decisions based on that.

In our project management world we pride ourselves on matters such as configuration and change management processes. We are content when we see that version controls are in place in a project, so that we have an understanding as to which “latest and greatest” version of the document is applicable. We are happy when we see that change within a project is being handled properly, especially when there is a lot of scope creep. It is, however, common to become lost among the plethora of documentation within a project.

What hurts organisations the most, is the amount of effort being exercised to collect information throughout the project, and yet effective decisions cannot be made when faced with challenges. I fully accept that one cannot compare the documentation for a railway project with that of a child in hospital – these are like chalk and cheese. The common point, though, is that in both environments information is paramount in making effective decisions. Moreover, if practitioners tend to navigate for longer periods within the documentation, chances are they may take longer in making decisions. In this case, the whole system relating to information gathering and usage needs to be reviewed.

What I also noticed about nurses is that, every child in the ward is important and is treated with the love and care that he or she deserves. The child’s background or parent’s financial status does not matter. Nurses work hard to ensure that every child in the ward gets healthy.

In the world of project management, many organisations do not apply this kind of thinking to their projects. Some organisations would design their reward schemes in such a manner that they only focus on high priority projects. For example, if a project manager has twenty projects within a year; management would pick two and deem these as high focus. That means that the project manager’s chances of obtaining a bonus or an increase for that matter may largely depend on the success of these two projects.

One can understand the logic behind this kind of thinking; projects vary in terms of strategic importance and therefore organisations may need to encourage people to put more emphasis on certain ones. The unintended consequence though, is that a project

manager may have a tendency to totally disregard other projects since they may not bring material gain to him in a form of a bonus and only focus on the high priority ones.

This can be a major problem because at times even if a project is deemed simple, but if it is not given the attention it deserves, it can turn out to be a nightmare for an organisation. Just imagine what would happen if nurses were remunerated in this manner, children in the ward would not get the same attention. Again one may argue, children in the paediatric ward and projects are chalk and cheese; the point here to make is that all projects in an organisation are important. The value they bring to the organisation may differ, but they are all important and therefore should all be given the attention they deserve.

Nurses pay particular attention to rank and file. What was noticeable during the period my son was in hospital, was that there is a certain level on which nurses communicate with those who are above them. The manner in which a staff nurse communicates with her counterpart is very different from that when she communicates with a sister, matron or doctor. This is irrespective of the age of the superior. One sometimes notices that most sentences are finished with a title – for example, “Yes, doctor” or “I have done that, sister”. One might look at this and think that it is very far-fetched, and such high levels of respect cannot be relevant in our project management environment.

The principle of respect, however, can go a long way towards enhancing performance in a project. It is not unusual in projects where a project manager might be younger in age than his project team members. In such cases, sometimes the project manager may struggle to drive the project, because some members of the team may feel awkward taking instructions from a younger person. It may be even worse if the project manager is better qualified than other technical team members.

People feel insecure, and want to show that the project manager knows less, or nothing, and is therefore incompetent to play any leadership role in the project. People forget that when someone is being placed in a position to lead, one needs to respect the person – and his position as well. This is irrespective of whether you like the person or not. Even if you feel that the person is incompetent to lead, it is not your place to portray him in a bad light so that you can score points. It is, however, your responsibility to liaise with the person in a constructive way when you see his shortcomings. In this way, the leader will have more respect for you and will value your input; however, this also depends on whether or not the leader has insecurity issues. Some people cannot handle constructive criticism; they take it too personally, and can even “crucify” you for it at a later stage.

The conclusion to all this is that we can all learn from each other. That is, project managers can learn from nurses, and vice versa. There is a general tendency among us to look down on professions such as nursing, teaching and police. We forget that without these professions there is not much that can be accomplished in the running of a country.

You notice this kind of behaviour when a child has aspirations of being a policeman. The parents will try their utmost to persuade him to become interested in other professions such as law, medicine or engineering. The manner in which we talk to

people in professions such as nursing, teaching or police, is sometimes not respectful enough. It is as if they are our slaves, and by being public servants, it is as if we own them. The minute we are not happy with some of their decisions, we voice our anger, without even understanding where they are coming from.

If there is a belief that I need to be an engineer to be respected, then there is something fundamentally wrong in our society. We cannot all be engineers, business owners or project managers. The kind of variety that exists when it comes to careers is what spices things up. It is what makes us all to contribute to this wonderful world that has been given to us. Each one of us has a role to play, and we can all learn from one another.

## About the Author



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**Lunga Msengana** is a Professional Engineering Technologist registered with Engineering Council of South Africa and holds a BSc Hons in Applied Science (with specialization in Electronic Engineering) through the University of Pretoria. Years later, his passion for projects led him to formally studying Project Management, which he obtained a Masters of Commerce in Project Management (Cum Laude) with Cranefield College of Project and Programme Management.

In his career life, he has worked as a technician, Business Analyst, Engineer and Project Manager. He had the opportunity to work for Denel, Saab Tech, Molapo Technology, and Vodacom South Africa. He is currently a project manager for Eskom Telecommunications. He is also an Associate Lecturer at Cranefield College of Project and Programme Management. He also serves as a non-executive director for World Vision South Africa. Lunga is a member of Project Management South Africa (PMSA) and the Institute of Directors in Southern Africa (IoDSA).

In November 2012, Lunga published a book titled "*The Missing Link in Projects*". The book gives full credit to the human factor in project management and it acknowledges the vital role people play in the unfolding of projects. It is well understood that project management has two main streams, the technical and the personal component. The personal component plays a role as it involves the people, and the key to project success is the people. However, the human aspect in projects is the most neglected. The book discusses topics in easy to read format.

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