

Project Management is a Life Skill

Interview with Sue Kershaw^{1, 2}

President
Association for Project Management (APM)
United Kingdom



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Introduction to the interviewee

Sue Kershaw is President of the Association for Project Management (APM) and a visiting Professor at UCL. She is also Managing Director of the Infrastructure Advisory Group of KPMG. She is acknowledged as being an influential leader and a leading Managing Director who has delivered £multi-billion construction, property and transport projects in the UK and overseas, such as the London Olympic Transport Portfolio. Her areas of expertise include: leadership skills of high performing teams; complex high profile programme delivery to time and budget through entire life cycle, on a risk-based approach; excellent collaborative working skills; ability to simplify complexity and influence decision-makers; strong stakeholder management skills: ability to listen

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and challenge; confidence in managing significant sums of public money.

From an engineer to an influential project management leader, she has worked hard for more than three decades. Her efforts have been rewarded by much recognition such as “Leader in Transport and Logistics Award (2017)”, “WICE Lifetime Achievement Award (2018)”, “Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) (1999)”, “Fellow of APM (2006)”, “Honorary Fellow of APM (2011)”, and more.

Interview

Part I

Q1. I noticed that you started your career as an engineer. How did you switch to project management? What’s your story with project management? Do you enjoy what you are doing?

Sue Kershaw (Kershaw): I don’t see it as a switch, but as a transition. After gaining chartered status with the Institution of Civil Engineers, I discovered that, although I enjoyed engineering and learning about construction and design, my passion was the management of projects and people to ensure successful delivery for the client.

Project management is based on solid logic and it is a life skill: we all need project management in our lives. Our businesses, schools and hospitals have to plan what they do, ensure there is enough budget and resource, and that the risks are managed successfully and to time. Project Management is needed across all sectors to make countries successful.

I thoroughly enjoy my job: the more large, complex and difficult the project, the better!

Q2. As an accomplished woman in the field of project management, how do you balance work and life? What are your secrets to career success?

Kershaw: I see there being three parts of my life: personal, my work, and my professional career. These are intertwined and grow with each other. For example, business planning approaches from work lay a good foundation for planning at home; the professional approach to competencies is a bedrock for recruitment at work; understanding the needs of my kids helps me understand the needs of junior staff at work etc. The key is always to have a state of equilibrium between the three parts, and save a little “me time” for physical and mental wellbeing.

I see the secrets to my success as being curious, immersed in what I do, and mindful that teamwork is key to success. No one person ever has the monopoly on good ideas! I also think that good leaders are listening ones who are approachable and humble.

Part II

Q3. According to your observation, what are the characteristics of high-performing teams?

Kershaw: High-performing teams are never the textbook perfect fit of competence and experience; they are actually a group of diverse people brought together with a common goal in mind. They are composed of leaders and followers that bond together and most importantly, have the desire to achieve the goals of the project they are working on, and see this achievement as being part of their personal legacy.

High-performing teams respect each other, and are fully committed to delivering the outputs and outcomes of the project. Each member of a high-performing team has different strengths and weaknesses that complement each other. Good leadership is essential. A good project leader has the intent of the project clear, and the vision to deliver it, bringing the project team and stakeholders along with them on the journey. They need to be good decision-makers, and transparent and open in all their dealings.

Q4. In the current VUCA era (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous), simplifying complexity is a challenge. Do you have some tips to share on how to deal with complexity? And any tips on change management?

Kershaw: I think VUCA is becoming more and more prevalent as our world changes and becomes constantly more disrupted. We have particularly witnessed this in the UK with Brexit.

My tips on dealing with complexity are: Recognise what is complex and what is complicated and deal with them separately. With the complex issues, ascertain which are mission critical and who is best placed to lead them, in the timeframe needed. Ensure the whole team understands the impact of the complexity. By dealing with complexity like this, it becomes more manageable and less overwhelming.

In the current VUCA era, change is fast-paced and constant. Change management must be rigorous, evidenced and the decisions must be documented. If a reason for change is not sufficiently thought through, the team needs to go back and do their homework.

Q5. Would you please offer some suggestions as to how to develop strong stakeholder management skills?

Kershaw: To be a good stakeholder manager, you need to put yourself in the shoes of the people you are dealing with so that you can understand their position and concerns, and how they are reacting to your requests. We all like being treated with respect. Also, there is a need to be honest on project timelines and impacts. If these are managed well and understood to be short-term pain for long-term gain, they are much more likely to be acceptable.

It is important that stakeholders feel they can be part of a project, so community gatherings and events are a good way to do this. It is also important to include schools in this engagement, so that the younger generation's voices can be heard.

Q6. What have you learned from managing the London Olympic Transport project? What should we pay attention to in managing large infrastructure projects like it? How should we ensure the transition from project delivery to operations?

Kershaw: The most important thing I learned was that driving a project by schedule to achieve an immovable deadline is extremely powerful and provides for rapid, strong decision-making. I also discovered that working on a project of national importance that was always in the headlines (with absolutely no option of failure) lured the best in class to the project, and we became a very close-knit team because of this. I also learned how strongly we react to change in our working focus, so moving the team from capital project delivery to operations was probably one of the most difficult tasks in the seven years I was there! However, planning this four years in advance of going operational allowed us to deliver a year earlier, and to test and refine the ops plan for Games readiness.

The fundamental aspect of managing large infrastructure projects is to really focus strongly on project initiation and preplanning. In this, the intent of the project needs to be clearly defined and understood by all, and the value for money and the affordability of the project should be crystal clear to all involved.

Part III

Q7. As the President of the Association for Project Management (APM), what do you believe are the trends of project management? What are the hot topics that APM is focusing on?

Kershaw: My goals as President are to establish project management as a profession, with APM as its unified voice. I also want to include progressive project assurance (i.e. assuring projects in real time to make sure issues do not become problems - the antithesis of audit) into the project managers' kit of tools.

APM's vision is to have a world in which all projects succeed and that project management is a life skill. We want to continue to grow and diversify our membership and chartered cohort, and use knowledge and research to guide our thinking. We realise that we need to continuously become more dynamic and agile to respond to a world of constant change, and make sure the most appropriate people are available for all parts of a project lifecycle. Project managers are an important part of the project community, but we need to respect the role of sponsors and project controls too.

Q8. As shown by many surveys, sponsors are essential to project success. How do you see the role of project sponsors?

Kershaw: The role of sponsors is fundamental to the success of a project. They are accountable for successful delivery, owning the business case and high-level stakeholder relationships. They are also the advocate for the project. The relationship between the sponsor and project manager needs to be a marriage whereby they clearly understand and respect each other's roles and responsibilities.

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About the Interviewer



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Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring will also serve as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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