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Interview with John K. Coyle
by Yasmina Khelifi
Interview

Project Thinking Should Be Design Thinking

Interview with John K. Coyle [1]

Design Thinking Expert, Olympic Medalist

Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi

International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Paris, France

Introduction to the interviewee

John K. Coyle is *one of the world's leading experts in "Design Thinking" and Innovation*. A highly sought-after speaker and lecturer, John is a graduate of **Stanford University** with a degree in Engineering - Product Design (Design Thinking) and Northwestern's **Kellogg Graduate School** of business with an MBA in organizational behavior, marketing and entrepreneurship. A former head of innovation for a Fortune 500 wireless telecom, John has also been the SVP of innovation for a leading strategy

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consultancy. John is a world class athlete in two sports (cycling and speedskating) and an **Olympic silver medalist,** as well as an NBC Olympic Sports analyst, and a guest lecturer on Innovation at several leading universities (Kellogg, Marquette, CEDIM).

John is a two-time TEDx speaker, and an award-winning author of two books, including the (2018) best seller: *Design For Strengths: Applying Design Thinking to Individual and Team Strengths.* John is also a thought leader in the field of "chronoception" - the neuroscience and psychology of how humans process time. Learn more at his website www.johnkcoyle.com

Interview

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Q1: First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. You wrote a book about strengths, whereas we talk a lot about improving weaknesses as a project manager. Could you explain why it is important to know your strengths?

John Coyle (Coyle): We are programmed from youth to overcome obstacles, learn new things and to fix weaknesses. However, I would contend that there is a difference between skill gaps and true weaknesses. Project managers are trained to find the "weak link" in any program – which is a good thing. However, if the next step to addressing the "weak link" is to ask the person or group to fix their weakness, sometimes that can de-rail the entire project. Better to design around or find another way.

Q2: Could you tell us more about the process design thinking to strength you've developed?

Coyle: Design Thinking is a process – and a mindset – out of Stanford's d.school (Design School) used by some of the world's most successful companies (Google, Apple, Cisco etc.) The process is comprised of 5 main steps when working through a difficult challenge:

1) Acceptance (you can solve a problem you are not willing to have),
2) Definition (do you really understand the complexities surrounding this problem?)
3) Empathy (do you really understand the human emotions and equations around this problem?)
4) Ideation (generate human-centered ideas to solve the problem
5) Test/prototype (fast fail different solutions until you get traction.) More important, though, is the mindset.

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At first the mindset of a detached analytical scientist – not anchored to any particular approach or solution until steps 1 – 4 are concluded. This allows for new, non-obvious solutions to emerge, and then, the passionate approach of a human-centered empathic problem solver – pushing things forward with care. Usually these two get inverted in problem solving…

Q3: Was this process/framework impacted by Covid19 pandemic?

Coyle: Well, yes and no. Per the above, the "obvious" solution to Covid-19 in my case (someone who prior to Covid-19 was paid to stand in front of enclosed rooms with large #'s of people shoulder to shoulder to give speeches) was to hunker down, stay home, be frugal and wait for it all to be over. But my design thinking background challenged me on this. Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest solution to any given problem is the right one… But I would argue that his is only true for simple problems. In this case this was a more complex problem worth redefining. So instead of accepting the simple notion "if you travel and try to work, you'll make no money and get sick." Instead, I reframed the challenge this way, "what I want is to travel and make money and what I don't want is to get sick or get anyone else sick." And hence I decided to sell all my worldly belongings and buy a luxurious RV and travel around the country visiting (carefully) friends and doing virtual talks from exotic locations. It was an amazing year…

Q4: You were an Olympic athlete for the USA. Since the beginning of this outbreak,many people have struggled. Lockdown was hard. To me, as an Olympic athlete, used to discipline, sacrifices, yen "learned" to be strong mentally and you had an advantage. Was it the case? If so, how has your experiences helped you?

Coyle: Perhaps I did – or at least my design thinking background, along with the willingness to make hard choices and sacrifices allowed me to ditch the safety and normalcy of the pre-Covid-19 world and do what, in hindsight, was the exact right thing, to travel, have experiences and expand my horizons through travel and friendships re-stoked in the heart of the lockdown. I did a bit of the same thing back in my Olympic days – when the Olympic program wasn't working for me – I ditched it and decided to train myself and went from an also-ran to a world record breaker and silver medalist in the Olympics.

Q5: Project management, agility: are there concepts also used for Olympic athletes? In what ways?

Coyle: For sure – you set goals and outcomes, identify critical success factors, and then plan the work and work the plan. Like real life you have to adjust as you gather new information and feedback. Like real life, outcomes can be unpredictable. Like real life it can be very time consuming….

Q6: What changes do you foresee in the Olympic World in the post Covid era?

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Coyle: Nothing too dramatic. The Spanish flu went away, so will Covid-19. That said, when I was an athlete and traveling all around the world we were constantly sick with colds and flu's from being exposed to different bugs and climates and having our systems worn down from all the travel and stress. I fully expect that elite athletes will be more socially distanced in the future in locker rooms, etc. and probably be wearing masks in proximity to other athletes before important events.

Q7: Do you see common points between project managers and Olympic athletes? Which ones?

Coyle: Of course. Every athlete is also a project manager – setting goals, identifying critical success factors and barriers, laying out a plan and then working it. In some ways the world of an athlete is simpler – "winning" is clearer and there are fewer exogenous factors that can intrude. One thing that is true in both cases (and back to design thinking) is that empathy is the key. You can yell at people all you want to try to get them to do their tasks better or more on time, but at the end of the day with empathy and empowerment comes intrinsic motivation which is vastly more powerful than extrinsic motivation.

Q8: What would you advise to project managers to thrive in the post Covid era?

Coyle: I once was a PM at Goldman Sachs for the Y2K conversion. I was dealing with old-school Cobol coders who didn't give a damn about what I was up to and created all kinds of obstacles – including even finding time to meet. One particular leader was the thorn in my side. He led one of the most important systems at Goldman and made every attempt to avoid meeting me. Even when I did meet with him, he never turned around. For a while I was angry and venting. But… I did not have empathy. Eventually I began to see the world through his lens and that soon I would be gone and he would still have his highly stressful job ahead of him. So… I modified a Dilbert cartoon to look like him and changed the dialog to ask something like "how many times will I have to meet with Mordecai before he turns his chair around." The next time I visited his office he turned around, laughed and smiled and after that it was mostly smooth sailing. Covid-19 will go away but it will leave us all changed and empathy for the new situations of all those we manage will be the key to success.

Q9: Do you have a last message to PWJ readers, please?

Coyle: Plan a future to really live today and create a yesterday worth remembering.

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About the Interviewer

Yasmina Khelifi

Paris, France

Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at Orange S.A. (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in projectmanagement.com as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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