

The Evolution of Project Leadership ^{1, 2}

Audrey Mphela

Dinosaurs did not adapt to the new way of project leadership. Look what happened to them now. The project environment has certainly evolved. My question to the project leaders is, have they evolved? Are they confident that they and their project team can anticipate the potential threats and opportunities of an evolving environment and are able to make breakthrough decisions based upon a combination of expertise, experience, and forward thinking?

In this VUCA global village, it is of paramount importance that project leaders identify not only risks that are commonly known to projects but risks also that are emerging with no historical data, risks that are developing, and risks that are ever changing. It is also critical to identify the risk of being a risk to ourselves. An example of a risk to ourselves as project leaders, project team, and/or project stakeholders, can be the risk of being irrelevant, outdated and redundant. When we consider the changes that have taken place between what was key in ensuring project success a year ago to what is key today – the difference is striking in terms of the technology, methodology and the terminology we use.

The project team will need to evolve with these changes. Innovation and technology have proven to significantly improve competitive advantage and project success. In the Mythical Man Month, Fredrick Brooks, asks the question, “how does a project get to be a year late?one day at time.” Due to the evolution of the project environment, perhaps the question we should be asking today, in this instant society is.... “How does a project get to be a year early?” One of the key changes in the project environment is undoubtedly the time it takes to complete not only one project, but multiple projects running simultaneously, where there is not one which is of less priority to the other. The expectation to expedite results is unquestionable.

(Example: The reconstruction of Santa Monica Freeway project in 1994)

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/earthquake-rocks-los-angeles>

Accessed 13/02/2022

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1994_Northridge_earthquake

Accessed 13/02/2022

¹ This article is based on a presentation by the author during the Project Management South Africa (PMSA) 2021 National Project Management Conference held virtually in November 2021. The PMWJ was a media partner for that event. To learn more about PMSA and their events, visit <https://www.projectmanagement.org.za/>. For more on the subject of this article, see the author profile at the end of this article and contact the author directly.

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07 January 1994, a massive 6.7 Magnitude Earthquake rocked Los Angeles. 48 000 buildings damaged, more than 22 000 people left homeless, some injured and some died.

One of the key areas affected was the Santa Monica freeway which carried more than 341 000 vehicles daily. The closure of the freeway cost Los Angeles more than 900 million dollars a day. This was back in 1994, 28 years ago.

Hashtag: #Project Management lessons learned should live forever:

<https://www.epi.org/publication/bp166/>

Accessed 13/02/2022

The project leaders elaborate, “We were rebuilding the roads and bridges within 24 hours of the earthquake. I issued an executive order suspending all statutes and regulations related to state contracting....My goal was to reopen I-10 within 6 months, and every other road within a year. Each contract included an incentive if the work was late, we charged a fine and if it was completed early, we paid a bonus and the motorists in Los Angeles were happy each time we did. We waived the requirements for lengthy environmental and permitting reviews for strict replacement work cutting 18 to 24 months off the construction schedule.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._C._Myers

Accessed 13/02/2022

To reconstruct the freeway in Los Angeles on a 140-day project plan: The project was expedited to completion within 66 days. Additional human resources came out to site: Where 80 Workers were required, 422 workers were hired, working 12-hour shift, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Other improvisations included using expensive fast drying concrete, rather than the usual.

Fast forward 28 years later a different disaster strikes. What has changed? What has improved? According to:

[www. https://www.worldometers.info](http://www.worldometers.info)

Accessed 03/02/2022

5,721,621 people have died so far from the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak as of February 03, 2022, 15:45 GMT. The COVID 19 pandemic is something that is here to stay with us for a long time.

<https://www.sacyr.com/en/-/el-secreto-de-china-para-levantar-un-hospital-en-10-dias>

Accessed 13/02/2022,

States that ‘China has taken just ten days to build a 25.000-square-metre hospital. The aim of the building, which has 10,000 beds is to isolate the sick and prevent new infection in the face of the unstoppable escalation of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in centre Hubei province. This feat has been made possible by putting together dozens of prefabricated

modules. How is China able to erect hospitals, hotels. Bridges or train stations in just dozens of hours? The key apart from a huge volume of labour, is in the use of prefabricated materials and modular construction'

How does learning and development come into play? Learning and Development comes in to play when we consider the role human resources will need to play to value add to projects going forward. With the increasing innovation and technology advances, this has also simultaneously increased the risk of human resources hands on services being wiped out like the dinosaurs and replaced with robots. Would it not be an idea then for human resource to learn how to speak to robots? Other than being able to speak to robots, there are many other ideas that project leaders and project team can come up with to continue be an asset to the project environment. The onus is on the project leaders and project team to explore the possibilities and opportunities that they can create themselves.

Attention to the third side of the coin becomes imperative for project leaders to stay relevant and resilient even with these drastic changes and evolution. Often when we think of the pedagogy of mastery learning, some of us may think of a chalk and talk set up, and this should not be the case. Learning can take place on the spot, as we go and as we grow. We need to be learning from current and past projects and also learning from outside the project environment in different settings and different circumstances - be it formal and/or informal.

Abigail Adams U.S. FIRST LADY (1797-1801) once said, "Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence."

When we intentionally and diligently invest time and finances to take on learning opportunities, we can learn new skills that will enable us to stay relevant, continue to value add and evolve with the future of the project environment. I share more about Learning and Development with reference to black swan projects in one of my presentations titled 'Project Management lessons learned should live forever, subtitled: how to curate and document your project management lessons learned.'

Innovation, technology, and human resource makes a difference in the evolution of the project leadership. To be futuristic project leaders who implements robust projects timeously, project leaders and the project team will need to strike the right balance. To learn new skills and abilities continually and consistently. May I encourage project leaders to continue to participate in the project Leadership conferences and explore common ground with other project leaders, to network globally and to collaborate where possible. I challenge project leaders to empower themselves through such and similar Learning and Development initiatives. I always look forward to the success project leaders endeavour to achieve. The opportunities and possibilities in the evolving project environment are infinite.

About the Author



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Audrey Mphela is a retail systems training specialist at SPAR SRDC where she was recently recognized as the best project manager for a 12-month project.

Audrey provides expert advice and guidance to store Owners/Managers with regards to IT Systems being used to develop skills and competencies. Activities include assessing if a store is operating within accepted parameters for the various departments; providing retailers with sufficient system knowledge to assist them in the management of their business, to use systems correctly, to analyze and act effectively on the information contained in a system; analyzing financial indicators such as gross profit, high/low profit areas, sales growth/loss, high/low sales areas, sales versus purchases, stock holding, cash flow, ratios; identifying areas outside the normally accepted operating range for a given set of criteria and to rectify the situation using a set of procedures designed for this. She advises store owners, store managers, supervisors, and operators on best operating policies and procedures to run and manage their stores to gain greater business benefit from using the group business systems, also to grow profit, reduce shrinkage and grow the business entirely through the application and utilization of the Group Business systems.

Audrey holds an Advanced IT Project Management NQF Level 7 Certificate with UJ and an E-Technology Professional Diploma. She is currently engaged in Occupationally Directed Education and Training and development.