

## ***Neuroscience: the secret ingredient in transforming power skills and project value***

### **Interview with Carole Osterweil<sup>1</sup>**

Keynote Speaker, Educator, Executive Coach  
Author of *Neuroscience for Project Success: why people behave as they do?*  
United Kingdom



### **Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi**

International Correspondent, PM World Journal  
Paris, France

### **Introduction to the interviewee**

Known for bringing an understanding of how the human brain works to the worlds of project management and business transformation, Carole's on a mission: to make the invisible human dynamics which get in the way of project delivery more visible – so we can stop squandering project value.

In demand as an educator and key-note speaker, her book, *Neuroscience for Project Success: Why People Behave as They Do*,<sup>1</sup> was published by the Association for Project Management in 2022.

If you're wondering whether neuroscience is relevant to you, this is what Lee Lambert, PMI Fellow and founder of the PMP exam says,

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*"I often considered books like Carole Osterweil's as psychobabble. But the Lebanon PMI Chapter ask me to line up some innovative speakers and I had the good fortune of meeting Carole. Not only was Carole able to shatter my image of "her kind" but the membership of Lebanon couldn't say enough about the applicability of her message. I think it is time to confess that what I once referred to as psychobabble may be the keys to the Kingdom when it comes to understanding why people behave the way they do. This could change EVERYTHING ... If I can be convinced, I know you can."*<sup>ii</sup>

Her pioneering approach is based on her work now, as a project troubleshooter and coach, and earlier in her career as an international project leader and transformation director.

An accredited Executive Coach since 2003, Carole holds an MBA and has trained in neuroscience, psychotherapy, and the arts. Her current assignments include building the UK Government's senior change, project, and program management capability at Cranfield University, and working with corporates through her business, Visible Dynamics.

- **Find out more** about Carole's work and download some of her articles from the Resources page of her website <https://www.visibledynamics.co.uk/>
- **Contact her** on LinkedIn <http://www.linkedin.com/in/caroleosterweil>
- **Book her** to speak to your PMI Chapter through the [PMI Global Speakers Hub](#)

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## Interview

**Q1:** First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. What are the main steps of your career as a project / program manager?

**Carole Osterweil (Osterweil):** I started out as an international project leader in the pharma, IT and motor industries. I got really fed up with being the person who was asked to sort out everybody else's people problems, so I decided I'd better start teaching this stuff!

I joined the faculty at Ashridge Business School, now part of Hult, where I was lucky enough to work alongside Professor Eddie Obeng in teaching of project and program management. Our courses were hugely innovative because we insisted: a) leadership is as important as process; and b), it's vital to match your approach to the context, (attempting to 'Paint by Numbers'<sup>iii</sup> will fail in rapidly changing environments).

Becoming an accredited executive coach was a natural progression as at the time these ideas were so revolutionary (this was the 1990's!), students needed personal support to apply them to workplace challenges.

Teaching and coaching progressed into consulting and troubleshooting transformation projects. I trained in psychotherapy to learn more about why people behave as they do, and my course included an introduction to neuroscience.

It wasn't long before I started applying these ideas to the world of project management, and discovering what a difference they make to resolving people issues.

I'm now on a mission to use ideas from neuroscience to make the invisible human dynamics which take projects off track more visible – so we can stop squandering project value.

I wrote the book, *Neuroscience for Project Success* in 2022 to further this mission.

Look at the recent research and you'll see this is more important than ever:

*"We know that a full 65% of all mega projects fail. Either they go over budget or time or both. Or they don't meet their objectives. At the current investment of \$20 trillion per year in major projects this would be like flashing \$13 trillion down the drain...Practitioners find turning around the people issues about six times more challenging than resolving technical problems. In other words, people, capability, and culture issues dwarf technical project issues by a factor of 6 to 1: people issues, 84.8%, technical project issues 15.2%."*  
*iv*

**Q2:** What made you quit the corporate world?

**Osterweil:** I've not quit the corporate world. I've discovered that I'm at my most effective when I'm sitting on the edge of organizations.

I add value by spotting what's going on under the surface of daily human interactions – the invisible dynamics. For example, how power influences what people speak about, what they say and don't say, what's considered 'safe' and what's considered career limiting. There's a growing recognition, these invisible dynamics dictate whether a project succeeds or fails.

When we're too closely involved with a project or organization, it's difficult to see what's REALLY going on because we get sucked into the culture and ecosystem. I prefer to be on the edge, where I can be more objective and courageous, and add more value.

**Q3:** How did you become interested in neuroscience?

**Osterweil:** Many years ago, we adopted two school-age children and I wanted to know how to be a better parent. A book by Dan Siegel caught my eye. He has a real gift for explaining how the human brain works, and how our biology, relationships and life experience impact our development, our ability to relate well to others and our ability to lead fulfilling lives. I was hooked!

**Q4:** As a project leader, why is it important to understand how the brain works?

**Osterweil:** Projects are all about change, and they have huge people impacts. You wouldn't ask a doctor to do a diagnosis without understanding Physiology, or a linguist to do a translation without a basic grasp of grammar. It makes no sense to ask project

professionals to deliver big projects, with huge people impacts without a basic model of why people behave as they do.

It's no wonder so many project managers struggle with people issues.

**Q5:** We can argue this is interesting on the intellectual side, but we have deadlines and projects to deliver. how can neuroscience help us become better leaders?

**Osterweil:** Look at the evidence about project failure, it almost always comes down to the people stuff and the invisible dynamics of human interaction. Yet this still gets very little airtime in the education of most project managers.

Look at history, and there's a legitimate excuse: we didn't have a robust model to explain why people behave as they do. But developments in neuroscience have changed that.

Equip a project leader with a bit of neuroscience, and they can cut through the complexity, and take better and more emotionally intelligent decisions. It's not an intellectual exercise – neuroscience allows us to deliver better project outcomes with higher productivity, in shorter timescales with less stress.

**Q6:** And how can project managers apply neuroscience when they are not neuroscientists?

**Osterweil:** A leading professor of organization neuroscience, Paul Brown, once told me: "It's a bit like a Christmas tree. Neuroscience research is continuing to generate lots of shiny new baubles - but what really matters is the Christmas tree itself."

Project managers don't need the baubles, they need the Christmas tree - and that's what I've put into the book. Focus on the Christmas tree and you'll see huge benefits.

**Q7:** You also talk about stress. Do we need stress? How do we overcome stress?

**Osterweil:** We've known since the early 1900s that there's a relationship between the brain's level of arousal and our ability to perform a task. When we have lots of time and little to do, we can find it hard to focus and performance suffers. The brain needs a degree of stimulation to operate at its best.

But too much arousal makes us stressed, anxious, and even overwhelmed. We lose the ability to focus, we have less emotional control and the quality of decision making deteriorates. The trick is to find our sweet point, where we have just enough but not too much stress.

Using Dan Siegel's terminology, at the sweet point, our Thinking brain is fully online.

I don't talk about overcoming stress. I talk about changing our relationship to stress and learning to judge 'what is the right amount', and recognizing the right amount is very personal. My right amount might be a lot more, or a lot less than yours.

In *Neuroscience for Project Success*, I introduce a series of exercises and frameworks to equip readers with the skills to judge 'what's the right amount of stress for me?'. I also introduce ideas to help them create an environment where they can ask team members and other stakeholders, 'is this enough, or too much stress?'

Just as important, I also emphasize that many organizations across the globe fall into the trap of seeing stress as a purely individual issue. It's crucial to recognize that stress can be systemic too.

Excess stress often leads to what I describe as the Project Stress Cycle. This is characterized by falling levels of trust, which impact the quality of collaboration, innovation, and decision making. It results in a spiral of declining performance across the project.

The first step in interrupting a stress cycle is to name it and ask others if they can see it too.

**Q8:** Projects are global nowadays. The way of expressing emotions differ from a culture to another. How can neuroscience help us to work in global teams?

**Osterweil:** Neuroscience gives us a way of understanding our emotional responses and the responses of others that transcends cultural differences.

It allows us to talk comfortably about 'what takes my/ your Thinking brain offline', and 'what will help to bring my/ your Thinking brain more online'.

It encourages us to be open and curious with team members from other cultures, about 'how we can best work together' without trying to be a mind reader or worrying that we will accidentally do something stupid or offend someone.

Interestingly, you can use the same approach to transcend differences and have similar conversations with neurodiverse team members.

**Q9:** You are also an executive coach. What is the main obstacle faced by leaders today? How to overcome it?

**Osterweil:** The main obstacle faced by leaders today is the sheer volume, complexity, and ambition of what they're trying to do - in a world where the stakes are higher than ever, and the outcomes more uncertain.

To counter this, and to stop individual and system-wide stress levels spiraling out of control, it's vital for leaders to learn how to keep their Thinking Brains online. The ideas I've mentioned here provide a coherent framework for developing this skill.

Once you've developed it, you will see the world more clearly. You'll be able to cut through the complexity and focus on what really matters and you'll benefit from a step function change in emotional intelligence and power skills.

**Q10:** Do you have a last message?

**Osterweil:** Let's go back to the statistics I quoted earlier "*At the current investment of \$20 trillion per year in major projects [we are] flushing \$13 trillion down the drain... [and] people, capability and culture issues dwarf technical project issues by a factor of 6 to 1: people issues, 84.8%, technical project issues 15.2%.*"

We can't afford to keep our heads in the sand. The development of project leaders needs a change in emphasis.

Introduce a pinch of neuroscience and you will see a startling reduction in the 6:1 ratio, a startling increase in people/power skills and a startling increase in your ability to realize project value.

Don't take my word for it, listen to Lee Lambert, (founder of PMP and a self-confessed cynic who grew up in the world of the iron triangle of cost, scope and time) "*I think it is time to confess that what I once referred to as psychobabble may be the keys to the Kingdom when it comes to understanding why people behave the way they do. This could change EVERYTHING*"<sup>v</sup>

## 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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<sup>i</sup> Osterweil,C. (2022) *Neuroscience for Project Success: Why People Behave as They Do*, (APM)

<sup>ii</sup> Lee Lambert, on Linked In,

[https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7028030558781771776/?commentUrn=urn%3Ali%3Acomment%3A\(activity%3A7028030558781771776%2C7028079421404119040\)&dashCommentUrn=urn%3Ali%3Afsd\\_ccomment%3A\(7028079421404119040%2Curn%3Ali%3Aactivity%3A7028030558781771776\)](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7028030558781771776/?commentUrn=urn%3Ali%3Acomment%3A(activity%3A7028030558781771776%2C7028079421404119040)&dashCommentUrn=urn%3Ali%3Afsd_ccomment%3A(7028079421404119040%2Curn%3Ali%3Aactivity%3A7028030558781771776)), (accessed 1 June 1, 2023 18:50)

<sup>iii</sup> Obeng's project typology, introduced in Obeng, E (1994) *All Change: The Project Leaders Secret Handbook*, FT Pitman

<sup>iv</sup> Budzier & Maylor quoted in Vyas,V, Zweifel,T (2022) *Gorilla in The Cockpit: Breaking the Hidden Patterns of Project Failure and the System for Success*, p3

<sup>v</sup> See i)