



The importance of emotional intelligence within Project Controls teams

Ensuring the successful integration with wider project functions

It is apparent in the infrastructure industry that some projects are still failing. This paper will discuss whether a contributing factor to the success of a project is in the emotional intelligence of the people within the Project Controls (PC) functions. Throughout the article, practical ways in which a PC team can use their ability to collaborate, to improve integration with the wider project functions, will be identified.

Now more than ever, understanding how to achieve successful team performance in businesses is vital. Over the past 20 years, the amount of work that requires collaborative activities has increased by 50% and mega trend research forecasts a continued increase in teamwork over the next three decades. Clarke (2009) says a project is a social process; in my experience, this is even truer in megaprojects. A mega project is a social network of interpersonal connections, and these networks are expanding as mega projects span regions and across multiple organisations.

Project controls are commonly understood as processes for gathering and analysing project data to reduce the risk of not achieving the project benefits within time and budget. While this is true, PC provide specific and discrete functions, it acts as a key integrator for all other project functions and therefore is as much, if not more, about managing relationships and mass integration as it is about process and systems. Furthermore, projects generally are emotionally fuelled due to the frequency and reliance on social interaction to deliver the project. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the role of emotional intelligence in forming high-quality relationships within a project environment.

Emotional intelligence

The concept of Emotional intelligence (EI) can be dated back to the 1920s. Thorndike (1920) conceptualised social intelligence as the "ability to understand and manage emotions" (Livingstone and Day, 2005 p.758). There are five sub-components, called constructs, in Goleman's (1995) model: self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy and motivation. Within each construct, emotional competencies are learned from our environment. This paper proposes the impact of these in an occupational environment.

Like many other nature-nurture debates, the popular view of EI is that the EI level we are born with provides the potential seed from which emotional competencies can be grown depending on our environment. Therefore, it is not certain that possessing a certain EI level will result in excellent work performance, but possessing that EI gives us the potential to develop those excellent work behaviours. Lindenbaum and Jordan (2012) claim that the impact EI has on a leader's work performance depends on the environment i.e. in the construction industry, certain competencies have more impact on performance than others.

Cooper (1997) attributes the relationship between EI and performance to building quality interpersonal relationships. Lindenbaum and Jordan (2012) second this view, finding that EI is only significantly linked to relational competencies, not all types of work performance such as cognitive decision making, and that it is interpersonal relationships that are success factors to organisational competitive advantage. So, it may be that to achieve maximum success in a project we need to focus on the softer, untenable elements like relationships a little more.

This paper discusses three aspects of the emotional intelligence concept and how these concepts can be applied by PC professionals: emotional expressiveness, leader-follower chemistry and group emotional intelligence.

Emotional expressiveness

Cooper (1997 p.34) emphasises the importance of having meaningful, authentically emotion-driven interactions for an interpersonal relationship to pay off. Practically speaking, this can be applied with honest, open communication instead of corporate spiel. For a PC professional to outwardly communicate with honest emotion towards an individual from another function shows a level of commitment to the receiver. For example, applying this to a Risk Manager and a Project Engineer creates a shift from a corporate conversation to a meaningful interpersonal relationship in which collaboration can occur. The outputs and efforts of the engineering function, as an example of a wider project function, are tangible and measurable.

On the other hand, PC outputs, such as risk management, can easily go under the radar. Therefore, evidencing that as a PC team, we are using up our emotional energy, a finite and valuable resource, in a workplace relationship shows the PC professional's commitment and value for the working relationship. This will allow

trust to build between the two parties, leading to more effective working.

Pryke, Lunic and Badi (2015) second Cooper's (1997) proposed route between EI and relationship quality via expressive emotional communication, particularly non-verbal communication. They found that expressiveness (head gestures) correlates with both EI and relationship quality. They conclude that non-verbal cues could mediate between EI and interpersonal relationship quality. An interesting implication for modern projects is the difficulty of expressing emotions accurately over email, compared to face-to-face interactions. As such, a suggestion for future research is to investigate Goleman's (1995) personal construct of EI and examine its predictability of collaboration when emails are the predominant form of communication.

One challenge most project teams have experienced over the past year has been working from home. This has resulted in less face-to-face interaction and increased communication over the phone without visual cues from others. This has made it harder to pick up on non-verbal cues and has impacted collaboration. This is particularly detrimental to the PC functions as they try to integrate with the wider project functions. To combat this while we continue to work from home, using a collaboration app such as Teams, and having the webcam turned on during meetings, can have a profoundly positive impact on working relationships as those non-verbal cues can be seen. If a person has the ability to manage their own emotion and use it to communicate expressively and honestly, they can create a shift to interpersonal relationships and in turn increase collaboration between the PMO and wider project functions.

Leader-follower chemistry

Pryke, Lunic and Badi (2015) developed the concept of 'project chemistry', which Nicolini (2002) describes as "a quality of interaction between people on a project".

One of the key constructs of chemistry is trust (Campbell et al, 2008). Trust is particularly poignant in discussing inter-function relationships such as PMO and Delivery Team relationships because each function has different goals and, unfortunately, naturally withhold information from the other. Delivery teams tend to have a 'get it

done' attitude, whereas PC tend to have a more considered and analytical approach. As a result, delivery teams may see Project Control's processes as a barrier to 'getting it done'. However, this secretive behaviour reduces collaboration and reduces the lesser-known collaborative advantage (Cao and Zhang, 2011). This can lead to a breakdown in interpersonal relationships and adversarial behaviour between the two teams (Cao and Zhang, 2011). Therefore, if PC were able to align the objectives of the two teams, the literature suggests there should be more cooperation to achieve the same goal. They can do this by goal setting at the start of a project to align with other functions and recording this in the project plan. These goals, and the resulting benefits, should be regularly communicated throughout the project lifecycle to keep the focus aligned. By each function contributing to the initial goals and expectations session, all functions and team members are accountable and part of the same team.

Leader-follower chemistry attempts to encapsulate all relational and behavioural success factors in projects, one of which Pryke, Lunic and Badi (2015) found to be leader EI. They conclude that the leader has an active role in nurturing the climate of project teams to maintain cohesiveness and chemistry in the team. This places a lot of importance on hiring and retaining the right PC leader. A practical application from this research can be seen during recruitment for PC leaders. The scoring should be weighted heavily on collaboration skills, emotional intelligence, and the ability to manage relationships, and less on technical ability or experience.

Pryke, Lunic and Badi's (2015) model of leader-follower chemistry highlights that through interpersonal communication, rapport builds between leader and followers in a project, and the amount of rapport built through interpersonal, harmonious connections is driven by a leader's EI (Gwinner, 2000). One benefit of increased rapport in construction projects is reduced conflict, which could allow for inter-function project teams to remain cooperative and collaborative.

Food for thought is it may be PC professionals who have been in the industry for a long time will be familiar with practising traditional methods of communication and emotional management. In contrast, the younger generation PC professionals who have developed their manner in recent years are akin to a new, relational, collaborative

management style. It's therefore important not to assume experience equals ability and always provide collaboration-related training and development opportunities to all employees, as well as not discriminating against less technically experienced professionals.

Group emotional intelligence

Druskat and Wolff (2001 p.86) introduced a framework to explain the emotional intelligence of groups. They define Group EI as "a team culture created by a set of norms and expectations that build a productive social and emotional environment (e.g. trust) that leads to constructive interactions, collaborative work processes and team effectiveness". They claim that a leader's individual EI behaviours set a precedent for other group members to follow. Group members will observe a situation e.g. conflict, and mould their behavioural reaction to the emotional response that is triggered by that situation. Through this emotion-behaviour cycle, the leader demonstrates norms for the group to replicate in similar social situations and these norms build an emotionally intelligent culture.

Applying this idea to the integration of PC and wider project functions in a construction project, the PC leader sets expectations through their emotionally driven behavioural responses to situations and consequently creates cross-boundary norms in the group. These norms drive the group to exert collaborative workplace behaviours towards stakeholders. An example of 'group social awareness' behaviours is appreciating the expectations of another function and this can be done through empathising and understanding the reason behind decisions. The group will then be more sensitive to decisions; consequently, the other functions will feel safe to be transparent and share information going forward.

Conclusion

To conclude, PC acts as a key integrator for all other project functions and therefore is as much, if not more, about managing relationships and mass integration, as it is about process and systems. Therefore, emotional intelligence and the ability of PC professionals to collaborate and integrate with wider project functions is key to the success of a project. This paper has discussed three aspects of

the Emotional Intelligence concept and how Project Controls professionals can apply these concepts: emotional expressiveness, leader-follower chemistry, and group emotional intelligence. Practical applications of this study include using a collaboration app such as Teams while working from home and having the webcam turned on during meeting. This can have a profoundly positive impact on working relationships as those non-verbal cues can be seen. Also, to organise goal setting sessions at the start of a project to align objectives across all functions and recording this in the Project Plan. A

further practical application of this research is never to assume experience equals ability and always provide collaboration-related training and development opportunities to all employees. Furthermore, do not discriminate against less technically experienced professionals as they may well hold a high level of emotional intelligence, which could positively impact the project's success. Finally, during recruitment for PC leaders, the scoring should be weighted heavily on collaboration skills, emotional intelligence, and ability to manage relationships and less so on technical ability or experience.

Bibliography

- Campbell, S.M., Ward, A.J., Sonnenfeld, J.A. and Agle, B.R., 2008. Relational ties that bind: Leader-follower relationship dimensions and charismatic attribution. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(5), pp.556-568.
- Cao, M. and Zhang, Q., 2011. Supply chain collaboration: Impact on collaborative advantage and firm performance. *Journal of operations management*, 29(3), pp.163-180.
- Clarke, N., 2010. The impact of a training programme designed to target the emotional intelligence abilities of project managers. *International Journal of Project Management*, 28(5), pp.461-468.
- Cooper, R.K., 1997. Applying emotional intelligence in the workplace. *Training and Development*, 51(12), pp.31-39.
- Druskat, V. and Druskat, P., 2012. Applying emotional intelligence in project working. *The management of complex projects: A relationship approach*, pp.78-96.
- Druskat, V.U. and Wolff, S.B., 2001. Building the emotional intelligence of groups. *Harvard business review*, 79(3), pp.80-91.
- Goleman, D.P., 1995. Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ for character, health and lifelong achievement.
- Gremler, D.D. and Gwinner, K.P., 2000. Customer-employee rapport in service relationships. *Journal of service research*, 3(1), pp.82-104.
- Lindebaum, D. and Jordan, P.J., 2014. When it can be good to feel bad and bad to feel good: Exploring asymmetries in workplace emotional outcomes. *human relations*, 67(9), pp.1037-1050.
- Livingstone, H.A. and Day, A.L., 2005. Comparing the construct and criterion-related validity of ability-based and mixed-model measures of emotional intelligence. *Educational and Psychological measurement*, 65(5), pp.757-779.
- Mayer, J.D., Salovey, P. and Caruso, D., 2000. Models of emotional intelligence. *Handbook of intelligence*, 2, pp.396-420.
- Nicolini, D., 2002. In search of 'project chemistry'. *Construction Management and Economics*, 20(2), pp.167-177.
- Pryke, S., Lunic, D. and Badi, S., 2015. The effect of leader emotional intelligence on leader-follower chemistry: a study of construction project managers. *Construction Management and Economics*, 33(8), pp.603-624.
- Thorndike, E.L., 1920. Intelligence and its uses. *Harper's magazine*.

Contact details



Amanda Buchanan
Lead Consultant
AmandaBuchanan@hka.com
Ph: +61 2 9255 9100

This publication presents the views, thoughts or opinions of the author and not necessarily those of HKA. Whilst we take every care to ensure the accuracy of this information at the time of publication, the content is not intended to deal with all aspects of the subject referred to, should not be relied upon and does not constitute advice of any kind. This publication is protected by copyright © 2023 HKA Global Ltd.