

# Achievement and success a matter of perspective?

by Ranjit Sidhu

Ever felt you're working really hard and achieving an enormous amount, but somehow not getting the success you deserve? In a competitive world, where the achievement of results is highly valued, it is tempting to take it for granted that if you work hard, then success will follow. This article considers why this may not always be the case and looks at what we, as project managers, can do to bring the often divergent qualities of effort and success closer together.

There are plenty of guidelines around on how to work effectively to produce results and successful projects, so why are we left in doubt as to how to make ourselves successful? It certainly doesn't always follow that if our projects are successful, then we are too!

Traditional project management approaches focus strongly on frameworks and process. However, there has been a recent shift towards methods that recognize that a wider, flexible behavioural view can be beneficial.

Marketing professionals know that to communicate really well, you have to understand the language and perceptions of your target audience before you start. They talk about communication reflecting back the views and priorities of the intended audience, displaying an understanding of their perspective in order to gain trust.

As project professionals, we understand that communicating information is critical to project success, but sometimes fail to realize that both projects and individuals can be more successful when communication also addresses the underlying emotions and motivations of all those involved.

To have our own success recognized, we first have to acknowledge those whose opinion we value and who we wish to impress. Then we need to become more skilled at understanding their goals and what they would see as 'success'. Does pursuing this seemingly personal agenda run counter to the goal of project success, or enhance its chances? What can we learn from the methods and guidelines around which we now base the wisdom of our profession?

To help explore this further, let's have a look at three perspectives on project management: NLP, Agile and change management.

## **NLP –the perspective of communication**

Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), gives project professionals the communication tools needed to both make the project itself successful and to gain recognition for their own successes. NLP methods help people develop the skills needed to raise self-awareness and better understand different angles and points of view (see 'NLP – firm foundations for soft skills', *Project Manager Today*, August 2010).

NLP looks at the 'nuts and bolts' of communication and offers a thought provoking framework within which to consider project communications. For instance, the APM Body of Knowledge specifies open mindedness as a requisite skill, allowing managers to take account of the variety of views involved on a project. NLP suggests that the meaning of communication is in the response we get, and demonstrates how we can come to understand the views of others and how they may interpret what we say.

While most people recognize that being sensitive to criticism is generally not a management strength, NLP shows us how to learn from the feedback we receive and regards this as important data to show how things might be done differently, and more successfully. It reminds us that regardless of our level of professional expertise, there is no limit to our ability to learn: we can always benefit from mentors who display the skills that we would like to develop.

Initially regarded as a psychology based theory that had no place in the pragmatic and process driven world of project management, NLP is fast becoming a mainstream discipline for project professionals. The skills it offers for understanding and influencing people, and achieving real results, are those that have the power to transform what we deliver into recognized success.

## **Agile – the perspective of collaboration**

For professionals looking for high 'success' ratings, Agile has a lot to offer. The framework of the new Agile Project Management qualification<sup>1</sup> focuses on the value of collaboration within the process of moving a project forward in iterative stages. This creates great flexibility so that we can adjust targets and expectations along the way.

The method is entirely collaborative, so it is much harder to fall into the trap of pursuing what you perceive to be the obvious priorities, without considering the differing perceptions of stakeholders.

Agile makes sure that a solid foundation is specified for the project, but then checks views and expectations at every step of the way, giving you ample opportunity to check both project progress against targets, and whether others perceive you are being successful. You then have the chance to adjust both effort and your communications style to achieve your aims.

Understanding varying perspectives on priority is critical. It is possible to achieve great things, but if these are not considered as a priority for the stakeholders, or the business,

1 The Agile Project Management qualification was launched in Autumn 2010. Based on the fundamentals within DSDM Atern, the new qualification can be applied to all kinds of projects across all sectors. The Foundation and Practitioner qualifications do not require prior knowledge of PRINCE2, but sit alongside it and other project management approaches. ChangeQuest are one of the first trainers to offer courses for the new qualifications.

success will not follow. Agile highlights the value of the MoSCoW prioritisation method:

**M**ust Have  
**S**hould Have  
**C**ould Have  
**W**on't Have this time

and encourages us to assess our own effort and use of other resources against the importance of the results. This helps to us to keep in our minds what is likely to be recognized as a success.

Agile emphasises the importance of clear and continuous communication between team members and stakeholders. The approach builds in both regular facilitated workshops for the project team, and 'daily standups' where team members have a chance to talk about what they have achieved, what they plan to do next, and what they perceive may be blocking their progress – an ideal chance to keep achievements on the path of success.

### Change Management – the perspective of commitment

When change of any kind occurs, it impacts us and the culture in which we exist. Change frequently has the effect of making people feel that things are out of their control and this can be unsettling.

At times like this, it's tempting to 'bury your head in sand' and keep really busy, 'achieving' more of what you have always done. But this won't bring success. You need to allow yourself to acknowledge what is changing and precisely what will be lost. You need to work out what this means for you and what the new order will look like, and to assess the part you can play in this new world order and the

community that will result. When you identify what you can contribute to the 'new way of things' and make the emotional commitment to do this, only then can you begin to marry up achievement and success, by identifying what your achievements offer to the wider community.

Project managers are frequently good at achieving specific outcomes, but achievement and success tend to diverge where effort is not spread across the three dimensions of leadership identified by Mike Green, Andy Holder and Mhairi Cameron (*Making Sense of Change Management*, 2nd Edition).

**Outcomes** – delivering clear project outcomes

**Interests** – influencing the right people

**Emotions** – enabling people and culture to adapt to change

Success is much more likely to result from an understanding of what motivates people and an understanding of how to tap into that motivation to gain commitment in an environment of change. William Bridges' distinction between change and transition is important – you can implement change, but you probably won't be viewed as successful unless you focus on transition and consider the underlying emotions of those affected by the change, and their problems in adapting to the new way of things.

Achievements can be gained through single-mindedness, effort and focus, but success only follows where a much broader view is taken – one that can take account of a variety of perspectives. Any single perspective is affected by an individual's history, the organization's history, and the personality types involved.

All are critical to success, and the Change Management Practitioner qualification offers the tools and framework needed to accomplish this.

These three approaches all offer a great wealth of tools and knowledge that will help us make that critical distinction between achievement (things 'being done') and success (things 'being done' and my gaining recognition for my achievements).

I have explored just a few elements in this article. It seems clear that considering whether we will be seen as successful requires us to think more widely about the world of emotion and motivation, helping us to understand perspectives other than our own. Good for us and good for the project.



*Ranjit Sidhu is Principal Consultant at ChangeQuest, which trains and coaches project and change managers using 'brain-friendly' learning concepts to motivate and accelerate progress, combining the rigour of change and project management frameworks and*

*processes with the practical application of behavioural techniques. Ranjit is an accredited trainer for the Change Management Practitioner qualification; a PRINCE2® and Agile Project Management accredited trainer; a certified trainer of NLP; and an APM Practitioner Assessor.*

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