



A FEARFUL

Dead projects cast long shadows, argue **Paul Brown** and **Brenda Hales**. This two-part series examines the place of fear and trust in coaching, particularly within complex project management settings.

Part 1: the positive impact on individuals and projects, of organisations building their knowledge of how the brain organises itself

Complex projects are high risk for individuals and organisations, whose wellbeing can be seriously compromised.

In the complex project delivery world there is infinitely more awareness of the risks to the organisation's financial wellbeing than to individuals' wellbeing, and little of how the brain works.

Coaching underpinned by a brain-based approach, with an understanding of the systemic context of complex project management, can make a huge difference to success or failure. Let's look at the systemic context.

The rate at which major projects fail is a matter of public record and



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of great commercial concern. In the UK, only one in 10 projects meet their time, cost and quality objectives; only half come close to delivering expected benefits and seven out of 10 government IT projects fail. Bigger organisations fare less well¹ (Cooke-Davis, 2009).

In 2009, 39 per cent of projects with budgets of more than \$100 million failed – the highest failure rate for projects of that size in over a decade; and globally more than \$3 trillion is wasted annually due to project underperformance, according to a series of reports by the US Standish Group.

Despite this, little attention is paid in the project management literature to the human issues – the power that makes projects

possible. One exception is a report by the government-funded Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council² (Winter & Smith, 2006), which talks of project managers becoming practitioners who can “... learn, operate and adapt effectively in complex project environments through experience, intuition and the pragmatic application of theory in practice” (p5).

The Australian International Centre for Complex Project Management (involving more than 35 major public, governmental and private sector organisations from Australia, the UK, the US and Canada) went a stage further³ (ICCPM, 2011), calling for a radical change in

thinking, one which “demands leadership that is strong enough to think about leadership itself, has the courage to adopt innovative approaches, and possesses the tenacity to deliver no matter what” (p3).

There is a noticeable shift in thinking between these two reports, from project management to project leadership, reflected in the choice of terms in each – ‘practitioners’, rather than ‘leaders’, in the first. We notice and welcome this developing trend. However, we must be careful not to disregard the importance of management. If management is about the effective use of resources (the known), and leadership is about strategic positioning

Case study: Angry Trevor

We were asked to work with a leader, Trevor, exhibiting anger management problems that meant his continued employment was at stake. Only too aware of how fraught this can be for all involved, we approached it with the belief that he had the capacity to change if we could engage his interest and sufficient trust.

Trust started from the honest response of the coach. At the second meeting this highly frustrated man leant forward and, menacingly pointing at the coach, hissed, "Of course I'm irritated. I'm right and you're just like the rest, you don't listen", to which the coach responded, "I'm listening now to how angry you are and while I'm interested as your coach, I want to share with you that I feel frightened."

As often as we have shared these moments, there are some that still surprise us – and Trevor did. He shrank back and, with a look of horror on his face said in a small and questioning voice, "But I don't want to frighten you." We sat in silence for several minutes, the eye contact saying more than words could. Trust had begun.

An explanation of his emotional reaction to stress from our brain-based approach enabled him to recognise his patterns. "It looks like I'm getting a handle on how I work inside," he said at the end of the session. With hope in his step he re-entered the challenges of his portfolio of projects. He could start to trust himself because he had choices. He now understood the chemistry, biological reason and shape of his anger.

complex, but it is made very simple in practice by knowledge that the central, sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the nervous system have evolved to manage the emotions and their effects; and that of the three categories of basic emotions (1 – survival, 2 – potentiator and 3 – attachment), productive, sustainable, adaptive energy (what in modern organisational practice is meant by the neutralising word 'engagement') will only come from the attachment emotional spectrum (excitement/joy: trust/love): while the survival emotions (fear, anger, disgust, shame and sadness) will only generate energy related to personal survival. The potentiator emotion of surprise/startle is often preparatory to any or all of the other seven.

Unfortunately, when project organisations experience failure, they often impose yet more controls and processes in a clumsy attempt to prevent future mishaps. Of course, future and inherently unknowable complexity cannot be controlled by this fear-based reactive approach. But the shadows of the old failures bind and blind the new and, paradoxically, sow the seeds for more failure by demonstrating lack of trust in managers and leaders.

If the brain, which is only about 4 per cent of the body's mass in volume but about 20 per cent of the body's energy supply (Medina, 2008)⁹, does not generate extra energy when demand is placed on its activities, but diverts available energy to where it is most needed, the pressure for performance and delivery is like having one foot on the accelerator (demand for performance) and one foot on the brake (energy being used to keep the system safe) when driving a car. And by definition, most

(making the unknown known), then any sense that management in projects should simply give way to leadership will lead to a loss of essential planning and control functions. On the other hand, management without leadership in complex environments is unlikely to be successful.

An idea that may also be gaining ground is that of Organisational Project Management (OPM), which offers the prospect of elevating the perspective from the individual project into discovering how we create organisations that enable projects and their managers and leaders to flourish for themselves and the organisation.

Brain-based coaching

Our approach to the individual and to project and programme teams is based on Siegel's clinical formulations of interpersonal neurobiology⁴ (Siegel, 2010) adapted for the commercial world⁵ (Brown & Brown, 2012). It is also based on the assumption of there

being eight basic emotions, with the amygdala having primacy of function in the development of the limbic leader⁶ (Brown *et al*, 2009); and the SCARF model proposed by Rock (2009)⁷ together with applications of the findings of cognitive social neuroscience (eg, Rock & Page, 2009⁸).

The question to which we continuously return in practice is: *What is it that motivates this individual or these individuals?*

In searching for an answer we default to these assumptions:

- emotions (e-motions = energy transformed into intentional behaviour = motivation) are the main source of energy for directing neurocortical pathways (and hence observable behaviour)
- the individuality of the person will only be understood within the framework of the uniqueness of the emotional patterning that created the development of the feeling system during the client's formative life experiences.

This formulation may appear



It is a requirement of the limbic leader that s/he can and does:

- Connect**
- Be courageous**
- Be clever enough**
- Walk own talk**
- Inspire others into action**
- Be worth following**

Figure 1: Distillation of the essential qualities of the limbic leader

complex projects are continuously pushing out knowledge and practice into the unknown, which is where a fear/excitement boundary operates continuously.

In a mechanical system like a car the result of having both competing demands at the same time is that the car initially struggles on but, after a while, judders to a halt, or a key part burns out. In a neurobiological system like a project manager, the contingent outcomes are exactly the same. It is more commonly called 'stress', and it is a state of which there are many adverse personal, physical, organisational and social consequences.

In SCARF terms, we can hypothesise that in a performance/process driven environment, where the processes are somehow

not delivering the performance, *Status* becomes threatened through the increasing probability of failure; *Certainty* (of good outcome) starts decreasing; *Autonomy* lessens through the inevitable increased involvement of increasingly concerned stakeholders; *Relatedness* is at risk of suffering as working relationships come under strain; and a sense of *Fairness* begins to be selectively impaired as anxiety among all involved increases.

In dealing with situations as they are (its primary function), the brain of the project manager functions less and less effectively in its most important task – staying creatively adaptive or, neurobiologically speaking, keeping the right ventro-lateral pre-frontal cortex in play.

How is this to be done? It requires the insights of interpersonal neurobiology.

The leader in context

Arising from Attachment Theory, it is clear that the brain is the organ of relationship as well as the means by which all data from the senses is assimilated and made available to the brain in the process of making meaning and taking decisions. Our focus here is not on the decision-taking

processes, but on the capacity of the brain to create and manage relationships – though decision-taking processes are enormously affected by this too.

There are three relationships to which we give active consideration when coaching individuals in complex project management:

- the individual's relationship with him- or herself
- the relationship within the hierarchy of the project itself
- the working relationship with the stakeholders.

We set them all in an over-arching framework of the nature of leadership, for which the practical questions for the coach are:

- How is this person a leader to him- or herself and to others?
- How does s/he lead or respond to being led in the project?
- What is the balance of leadership between the stakeholders?

In a consulting exercise, and to clarify the characteristics of what in practice is meant by the concept of 'the limbic leader' (*Brown et al, op.cit.*), it became imperative to synthesise and focus a great deal of knowledge about 'leadership'¹⁰ (*Brown, 2011*).

Without any preconceptions as to the outcome, the exercise resolved itself into what seemed to be the six irreducible characteristics of *Figure 1*. A single attachment



emotion was common to them all: trust. In the first five aspects the individual trusts themselves. In the sixth, trust is the effective energiser of engaged followership (Chaleff 2009)¹¹.

Figure 2 shows one formulation. Attachment emotions shown in this way help clients understand the emotional basis of behaviour. This leads to acceptance of the possibility of personal change which, when coupled with a drawing (eg, Carter 2000; 2010)¹² of the triune model of the brain (MacLean, 1990)¹³, excites the potentiator emotion of surprise.

Our focus on trust was stimulated and reinforced by an exercise we conduct with project managers. Near the start, group members write down characteristics of the best leader they have experienced in successful project management. The resulting lists are always of characteristics at the core of secure attachment, with 'trust' the word most often used.

Conclusion

Despite the title, we have not dwelt much on the basic emotion of fear in this paper. As a survival emotion, it is much easier to generate and maintain organisationally than attachment emotions. The latter do of course profoundly affect the experience of being alive, and create an almost endless supply of energy that can be highly productive when properly focused.

As brain-based coaches we must always remember that trust is most helped to flourish when its boundaries are understood. ■

- **Next issue: part 2** Drawing on applied neurosciences to help leaders work with organisational complexity
- See 'The Dance of Trust', on page 32

Project Engagement Indicator [PEI]

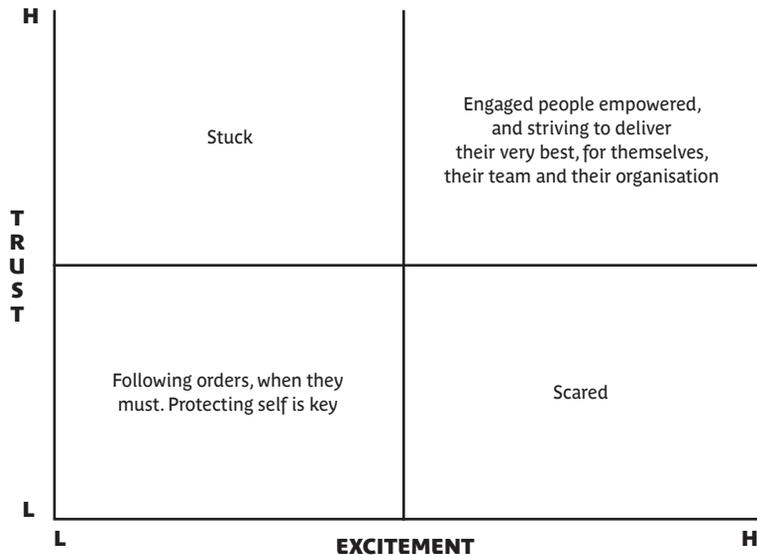


Figure 2: The impact of the attachment emotions on team function

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