

Robbie - A Thinking SQUID's Legacy



Briefings on the collaborative project team experience

Robert Nelson

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Cover picture: As a reflective thought leader and practitioner of collaborative projects, I am at the same time in the middle of the action and an observer of it. This is the same mental approach I try to bring to my photography, thinking and feeling myself into the scene, "seeing" the end result before capturing the image, and then reflecting on what I can learn for capturing similar images in the future.

Dedication

To all the people who thought about it, all the ones who did it, and those yet to do it.

You are my teachers, whether or not you know it...

I am indebted to you all.

To Franco Tigerpus Tabbycat -

We will miss you forever times infinity.

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Kanwardeep Singh – learner, friend, entrepreneur (and more mentor than he probably realises, even after all these years.)

Thousands of learners over the years, especially the ones taking the Applied Management course – you started me on a journey that has endless possibilities based in passion and service.

If there's anybody reading this book who isn't featured in the list here, and thinks they should be, the omission is entirely mine and done without malice.

Introduction

I've spent a lot of my working life involved, one way and another, with "Leadership" and "Management". I've had it done to me, with me, done it with and to others, and trained plenty of others how to do it. Plenty of different sources have been consulted. Lots of experiences have been lived through – some wonderful, some OK, and some even I don't like to remember.

Over the years, I have been privileged to work for, and with, some absolutely brilliant humans. Some of them showed me what worked well; and helped me understand why different people and circumstances demand different approaches. Others have taught me what doesn't work – sometimes with me on the receiving end of it. Valuable lessons – even if I didn't appreciate all of them at the time.

How this book turned out is not the way it was originally conceived, which is often the way with projects. While the original concept would likely have produced a small income stream, it probably wouldn't have supplanted my day job income. Instead I decided to turn the concept upside down; to gift a legacy whose value is deposited in your intelligence and emotional bank accounts – not as cash, but as advice for navigating your way through the adventure that is collaborative project work.

My most challenging and, I have to say, satisfying experiences have been working with student (Li/MiT, or Leaders in/Managers in Training) teams on collaborative projects at tertiary education institutions in New Zealand, attempting to solve real-world problems. The chapters represent a series of briefings for them, repeated many times and with little variation in content, rather like a well-worn script. I no longer need to look at the pages to know what comes next, but the knowledge and experience that underly my delivery deepen with each performance. Some of them are briefings that have been part of my standard approach for each new cohort of Li/MiTs. Others are in response to questions that should perhaps have been more common.

As a Course Facilitator, Leader, Manager – whatever the role – I care deeply for my people, and that's why I've always been way more "present" than any of my contracts have officially called for. I've always understood my roles to be about support and growth. To have a part in helping people achieve more than they thought possible is a privilege that simply makes getting up every day worth it.

These are "practitioner briefings" here; ones that aren't full of references to all sorts of learned sources for you to follow up on. They are my voice, exactly as if we were sitting around in a circle and having a conversation about all the potential pitfalls you need to be ready to deal with. I don't claim to have all the answers, and the advice presented here is necessarily generic. I've seen it work often enough, though, to be confident it applies far beyond the typical Li/MiT scenario in tertiary education settings.

Enjoy the read; and enjoy your collaborative project team experiences.

Rob

16 March 2022

Naenae



As you make your way through this collection of briefings, please also enjoy some of my photography from the last year.

The legacy

Part One

In which I attempt to make sense and value out of my experiences as an educator and trainer, leading up to 22 December 2018

As I sit here, entering my seventh decade
It is an opportune time to reflect deeply
To pause and take stock of what is done
To be rightly proud but not immodest, vain.
To look forward to what remains yet undone

How shall I know that I have lived?
Lived a life of meaning and of purpose
What evidence can I produce to state my case?
Is it as long as others speak my name?
Or simply hold me still in their memories?

I have had different careers, each one enjoyable
For the most part, with a few exceptions
The connections between them not always inevitable, blindingly obvious
At least, not at the time, never then
No crystal ball gazing for me – so what?

A desire to escape something that wasn't working
A chance to do something different, somehow exciting
To enjoy what I did, to grow, to remain comfortable
To reach for the stars would come later
After disappointments and stresses various – new approach required

Back to “school” to learn leadership and management
Not as I had been exposed to it
But as it should be done for best effect
This would provide my epiphany experience, totally unexpected
236 Applied Management – as real as it gets

Not just learning the theory, not that course
The equivalent of “Go play in the traffic...
Find out how the books work in real life
You sort out your own leadership and management
Experience highs and lows, solve your own problems”

Tutor Tim trusted us, but pushed us hard
Being the best version of ourselves not optional
This was “real work”, except we weren't getting paid
At least, not in cash, only in experience
At last – here was my place to excel.

Little did I know then what lay ahead
Going from being student on that last Friday
To joining the teaching ranks that fateful following Monday
To eventually making my beloved Applied Management mine
Transforming it into a serious badge of honour.

Taking learners “on the ride of a lifetime”
Pushing them like nobody else ever had before
Supporting them to the point they became my life
Encouraging them whenever they felt down or hopeless
Helping them reveal how much they had grown.

Some did not like me very much at all
Some would probably have used the “H” word
To describe how I led them on their journey
I’ve always said “Leadership is no popularity contest”
My role is to serve before all else

I do not teach, not now, not ever
I train minds and hearts to ask questions
Not what to think, but always how to think
Not to blindly accept but to seek evidence
To support and promote their original, awesome possibilities.

There were moments of great triumph, and disappointment
I hesitate to say of disaster without rival
Some people chose not to get along with others
Some not to get along with even themselves
No matter what, I never *ever* deserted them.

When they graduated – what next for my people?
Challenges they now had self-belief to master
They knew they were good, better than originally thought
When they were ready to survive without me
Like any proud parent, my legacy was created.

There were local and national (multiple times) awards
External validation of the “ride of a lifetime”
But it was not for awards I committed myself
As a leader I served my people’s needs
The world is a better place through them.

So many lessons learned, so much value created
My role changed, but not of my choice
In one moment my value was totally stripped away
My identity cancelled as if it never existed
My legacy wiped, denied to future learner generations.

Part Two

In which I speculate on how my leadership role has changed since 23 December 2018 and what that might mean for my legacy.

Enough of the past – what of the future?
Possibilities, but not as I had once anticipated
Still with collaborative learning, but with more collaborative assessment
A doctorate now, in Professional Practice, no less
An opportunity to lead, but in a new space.

To capture all the value from my past
To reflect before, during, and ahead of actions
Thank you to Schön, Mezirow, Dewey, for your structures
Giving me structures to understand this dynamic world
To create more authentic growth experiences for learners.

Collaboration should not be learned only as theory
It should be experienced, and repeatedly at that
To be lived not just as a qualification's capstone
But as its foundations, beating heart, and structure
Where organisational culture is real thoughts and actions.

Where project cohort and teams co-create living tikanga
Where outer parameters are set, everything else co-designed
Where the lines between learning and doing deliberately blur
Where qualification and project integrate holistically, somehow naturally
Our mantra thus: Knowledge informs practice informs knowledge.

Co-design challenges all of our old assumptions
New opportunities, otherwise unrealised, can be opened up
Learners and educators become partners in a shared enterprise
No longer teacher teaches and learners hopefully learn
Educators will be guides, facilitators of the possible.

“Success” will be defined not just by “marks”
But by contribution and growth across the journey
Hard knowledge and skills alone are not the prize
Can you lead, can you follow, switch between?
Can **you** make a difference to the world?

Do I need my name on a theory?
As in “Nelson’s This Model” or “Robbie’s That Model”?
To create something at a design level – a start?
To enthuse and engage others with exciting possibilities
To have them take and own the model too.

To take my learning, to add theirs too
Customising the generic model for unique local circumstances
My ego does not need my name in lights
More important for me is making a difference
My legacy something that continues evolving after me.

If I could gift advice, it is this
Do not fear collaborative learning and collaborative assessment
Embrace and enjoy your shared “ride of a lifetime”
Whether as leader, advisor, or “hands on operator”
I will be there – this is *our* journey.



These pictures of the same rosebud in our garden over a four day period represent (in floral form) what I hope my legacy will be:

- *Taking people who have a lot more potential as collaborators that they realise and strategising with them how to build on what they already know and are capable of in a project environment.*
- *Sharing with them tools, techniques, and the benefit of my knowledge and experiences in many collaborative situations.*
- *Encouraging cohort members' belief they are more capable and awesome than they think they are*



- *Supporting them to use those tools and techniques – including any they create themselves – as they journey from being a group towards being a team.*
- *Challenging cohort members to stretch themselves and develop a tolerance for managed risk-taking.*
- *Acting as a coach and mentor to stretch themselves and participants rather than a single source of all true knowledge.*
- *Encouraging active reflection.*



- *Assisting with bringing team and project elements together in line with what was negotiated at the start of the experience.*
- *Recognising and celebrating excellence in application, personal and professional growth.*

Section A: Praxis Shock and revealing you as a leader

In which I talk about the importance of **ATTITUDE** and leadership...

Praxis Shock – you are about to enter a whole new zone...

When you get to your practical project – typically the “capstone” course at the tail end of a qualification - it’s an experience unlike anything you’ve had on the way to getting there. This is the time when the theories you’ve learned in other courses; and applied in assignments that have often focused on hypothetical problems, or ones where the outcomes are either already known or fairly predictable, really get put to the test in one holistically integrated project. Each of your earlier courses will have stood on its own – some higher-level courses will be built on *assumed* prior knowledge and experience from lower-level ones *in the same specialisation*. For others that don’t have higher continuations, you may not even have been told about their connection to the experience you’re about to live now.

Whether they’re connected directly to the project itself, or to the way you put your project team together and run it, even the things you weren’t interested in at the time suddenly become important. **Not** because they tell you the answers, since you are dealing with unique problems requiring solutions that can’t just be taken “off the shelf” and carried across. **Because** this project is a proper *collaborative effort*.

You might have worked together on smaller assignments in some of your other courses, but most of your overall course marks were determined by individual work. Chances are that, even in group projects, each person just concentrated on their own part of the overall product, with one poor person having the job of sticking all the bits together and hoping they made coherent sense overall. You just hoped that everybody else did what they were meant to do, in line with a quality standard that was assumed rather than discussed, and on time (which translated as “just before the deadline” for the combined output to be submitted).

In the past, whoever facilitated the course pretty much decided the structure of everything, told you what to do and then assessed how well you did it. You learned to “play the game” and largely did as you were told. Whether you liked it or not, you were inside a comfort zone.

I’ve got news for you. **This** project is going to be different to everything you’ve experienced before, **and** it’s going to test your ability to live up to the Graduate Profile for your qualification – which you may or may not ever have paid any attention to - for the following reasons, *all of which are non-negotiable*:

- YOU get to put your team together within some fairly generous external parameters. The Course Facilitator is not going to do this for you; nor will they be your first port of call when it comes to sorting out all the little niggles that invariably arise when people work collaboratively. Instead, they are going to expect you to use what you have already learned about people management to try resolving the issues yourselves before you ask them to do it for you.
- ONE is **NOT** a team. The fact that you don’t like working with other people is irrelevant, and it’s not going to get you past this requirement.
- You have a fairly wide latitude in project selection, providing your choice fits the course criteria. Having defined the sorts of things your team are interested in; the challenge is then to find a project that ticks as many of those boxes as possible.
- What you are going to work on is **REAL**. It’s not something made up from a textbook – and it’s not something that anybody else has done before *exactly like what you are doing*.

- What you end up creating will be as **REAL** as it gets. **REAL** solutions to **REAL** problems and **REAL** opportunities – things that happened **ONLY** because **YOU** made them happen. Those are the great entries on your CV that you can talk about when you are interviewing for jobs, because they aren't theoretical "Might happen..." fantasies – they are actual "Did happen; and let me tell you how I made it happen..." stories.
- While you will probably cover different topics each week in your scheduled classes (I'd rather call them "training sessions") in much the same way you would in any other course, each week is also going to have time dedicated to practical activities connected with your project work. Best benefits will come from *taking part* in those activities rather than sitting back like a spectator.
- You are going to spend **a lot** of time each week working on your projects outside of scheduled classes. **Way more** than you have on anything else you've done before. One of your challenges, believe it or not, is going to be to make sure you don't spend *too much* time on it. Project creep is a real thing so it's important for you to pay attention to how everything else you need to fit into your life is impacting on project work and vice versa. This project is a job of work – it's not meant to be your whole life.
- **You** get to decide how your project team runs. Your Course Facilitator is there as a guide, but they won't be making decisions for you – that's something you need to be doing yourselves, because there's no substitute for **you** doing it.
- You will probably discover that the textbook theory doesn't *exactly* fit what's happening for your project or your team. This is your opportunity to modify what the books have to say in order to solve your own problems or take advantage of your own opportunities.
- You will discover your relationships with team members change. Some you might like more as you go on than you did at the start – and vice versa.
- Sometimes people will do things that frustrate you – whether or not you can express *why* that is. Sometimes, you will do things that frustrate others – whether or not they can constructively communicate why that is.
- There will be times when emotion rather than logic drives what you want to do in the heat of the moment. Some of you will spend more time in this emotional zone than others, and the time you spend there is definitely going to tell you something about yourself that might be news to you in terms of how you get on with others.

Advice

- This is going to be an adventure, and that means there might be some scary times as you go outside where you thought your comfort zone was. Remember that everybody else on the same adventure is going through something similar – you aren't alone.
- Try to approach things with as open a mind and heart as you can manage. Start from the premise that other people thinking and behaving *differently* to you is not the same as thinking or behaving *wrongly*.
- Be ready for this experience to become a time-soak, because that *can* happen without you being consciously aware of it. Making changes to stop the team and the project taking over your whole life is best done when you experience the need – leaving it for "later" is rarely a good idea
- There is nowhere to hide in the middle of your team or this project. If you don't want to perform, get ready to be found out. If you aren't prepared to ask for help, get ready to get left behind or left out.
- Be ready to learn plenty about yourself that you either didn't know before; or didn't acknowledge.

Above all, enjoy the experience. It's knowing how the theory actually works in real life; and having a tangible accomplishment on your CV at the end of the course that either makes you employable, or more employable – and that's why you are here, not just because the course is a compulsory part of your qualification.



There may be times, especially at the start, when you feel like the journey ahead of you is like staring down a long, dark tunnel. The waypoints that have been described to you aren't doing much to illuminate your mental path – at least, not yet – and where you're supposed to be heading is more a promise of light at the end rather than something you can see clearly.

Part of your challenge is to bring your own light to the tunnel, Something I want you to understand very clearly right from Day One is that I believe you can light up the tunnel. You might not all find the same way of doing it – that doesn't matter. What matters is that you have to work a lot harder to prove me wrong about what I think you are capable of than you do to prove me right. I've never yet met anybody that genuinely wanted to work hard when they discovered they could work smart instead.

ATTITUDE

Do you understand how much of a difference you can make in somebody else's life? How much of a difference do you want to make, and does that ever change? If it does change, do you know what changes it? Do you care about making a difference at all, or is being part of your team a poor choice or a necessary evil? What about making a difference in your own life?

Technical skills are (relatively) easy to train for. They are also relatively easy to assess using an appropriate mix of practical and theoretical tools. You can have a marking schedule and a performance grading system. These may be linked in some way to your progression through the ranks in the organisation. As long as these things are clear they are likely to be accepted as part of the 'membership package' for the organisation.

It is often said that **ATTITUDE** is the most difficult thing to train for. Many 'experts' believe it's something the individual is born with – or they aren't. Having the right **ATTITUDE** is a priceless attribute. **The questions you should be asking and answering for yourself are:**

- Do you have a desire to be in the organisation? Are your words and actions – past and present – indicating you are in the right place for you, your customers, and for the organisation?
- Do you have a passion for what you do, or could be doing in the future? Is it simply a means to some other end that has nothing to do with the organisation and its people?
- Is learning how to do what you do better 'business as usual' for you? Are you not too proud to learn from those who may be junior to you in the organisation or younger in age? Are you not resentful of learning shared by those senior to you in the organisation or older in age?
- Is non-discrimination a natural behaviour? Do you have no problem with the fact that everybody is different and treat everybody else with appropriate respect at all times? For you, being different never makes somebody else wrong.
- Do you enjoy, if not of all of your tasks, at least all of your people? Do you understand it can be the little things you do that make a big difference for somebody else?
- Do you make sure you have the right information before you act? Focusing on each task you do, and each person you deal with, will help make sure they get the amount of attention they deserve.
- How well do you want to perform? Is excellence your benchmark, or is mediocrity acceptable as long as your performance meets minimum standards and the boss doesn't tell you not to bother coming back?
- Communication is a constant and consistent behaviour. You share what you know and what you think (as appropriate) rather than trying to make yourself the indispensable person because you are the only one who knows something critical.

Are you, or are you going to be, the "**ATTITUDE** Champion" in your project team? To answer this question don't go straight to a textbook for a definition of what you *should* do. Do you 'live' the most important **ATTITUDE** qualities in what you do on a regular basis?

This section has been taken from the following source, and is used with kind permission:

Nelson, R. A. (2014). *The essential people qualities handbook: A handbook for leaders, managers, followers and subordinates*, (pp. 22-23). SQUID Thinking Tactics Limited.

Values and Value – and how they differ

What's the difference between values and value? You'll probably come across these words frequently as part of your team project, so it's important to be clear about what they mean so you can use them correctly. At their simplest, values are *what you believe in*, and value is *what you deliver for others*. Still confused?

Core personal values – the ones that really define who you are as a person, and which don't change from one situation to the next – include such things as loyalty, creativity, respect, teamwork, kindness, learning, excellence, professionalism, patience... The list could be a lot bigger than this – I've just picked what I think are some of the more important values in the context of being part of a project team.

Practicing your core values makes you feel good about yourself. That good feeling leads to increased self-confidence, which leads to more good feelings, which encourages more behaviour aligned with the values, which makes...you get the picture. Conversely, you know when your thoughts and actions aren't aligned with your core values because you don't feel good about what is happening. Most people, when they realise there is a misalignment, act to bring thing back into line again. Complicating life in a team situation is that your values and how you practice them, are going to be influenced by what your fellow team members say their core values are, and how you perceive they are practicing them.

This last point is really important. Like it or not, other people are going to judge *your* performance based on how *they* perceive it to be against *their own* standards and expectations. In case you think this is something that only others will do to you – whether you know it consciously or not, you are also doing it to them.

I think about the value you deliver to others in two ways. Perhaps the most obvious one is what your team's project delivers for your Project Sponsor, their organisation, and their clients. How has what you've done made their lives better (by whatever measures are important to them)? That value has probably been specified in the original contract you negotiated, so you have a set of metrics for the project's outcomes to be measured against. Just make sure you don't leave all your measuring until the end of the project because it's too late to make any changes then if you didn't meet any of your previously-agreed targets.

My second way of thinking about the value you deliver is what you do for your fellow team members. A lot of what this means is probably going to be covered in your Standard Operating Procedures – things like keeping any commitments you make, sharing rather than holding back any specialist knowledge you have, treating each other with respect, responding positively to requests for help...you get the picture. Perhaps the most important thing anybody can do to help add value to their fellow team members is simply to do what it takes to make the team a place they *want* to be.

Why should you do this? Simple: Unless you are somebody that just doesn't care about anybody apart from you, you're going to be hoping your fellow team members are doing that for you. It's one of the oldest truths of all – what goes around generally comes around.

Advice

- Take the time to think about what your values are. This is something that's worth doing seriously as part of the team formation process because it's something that you are going to be measured by.
- The values you claim to have should be the ones you actually demonstrate in action. The rest of your team are going to focus on what you do more than on what you said, because only one of those two things is real. That can also lead them to get side-tracked by things that add value to neither the team nor the project.
- Before you criticise the stated or perceived values of anybody else in your team, check in with how closely you are sticking to your own stated values, and think about how other people might perceive *your* actions.
- Ensure that all value-additive activities connected to the project are negotiated, clearly defined and explained as part of your team's Project Contract. If they need modifying during the life of the project – do it, rather than carrying on with activities that don't add maximum value.



Money is a convenient denominator for measuring just about everything. It's not the only measure, though, so don't let yourself fall into the trap of thinking it's how every output from your project has to be measured. The day you compromise your core values for the sake of money marks a significant change in your relationship with yourself.

Leadership is not a popularity contest

True leadership is not a popularity contest, although it certainly helps for the leader to be liked. Being liked makes it easier for you to multiply your influence through the thoughts and actions of the people you lead.

True leadership is about your belief that the team is greater than you, and that your role is to support the rest of your team to be the best they can possibly be. In Robert Greenleaf's famous model, it is the role of the leader to do things that support all their people, making sure they have all the resources they need to do what they need to do. It is not the role of everybody else to do things just because that makes the leader look good in front of others, feel good about themselves, or because that's what they think a team hierarchy or organisation chart are all about.

That means the leader needs to be thinking strategically and tactically – not just operationally about what needs to happen today and maybe tomorrow. Rather than keeping this thinking away from the others in the team while it's happening, the effective leader will invite them to be part of the thinking process. Li/MiTs are more likely to buy into the thinking if they've been a part of the process rather than just the people on the receiving end after it's all done. It is about creating a shared set of beliefs; and empowering each member to believe in themselves as much as you believe in yourself.

True leadership is about making the hard calls – the ones that might be different to what they would make as a friend. When I say this, many people immediately think of decisions that might be better for the team than for an individual. Remember, though, that leadership is about caring for each of your individual people – not just the overall project. Sometimes that duty of care means you have to make decisions that place the welfare of the individual member, or members, ahead of the needs of the team or even the project.

Being the leader doesn't – *shouldn't* – mean that you are expected to know everything. Nobody is that good. There will be areas where you know enough to be considered an "expert" within your team. Share that expertise with your team when it's necessary and in ways which are appropriate. Your expertise is an invitation to the others in the team to come on an adventure with somebody they feel they can trust. It should never be presented to them in ways that make them feel inadequate and unwilling to play an active part in the life of the team and the project.

Let's think about who gets to be the leader. I've known so many teams where the leader ended up being the first person who opened their mouth when the very first discussions happened. It's as though everybody else perceived them as having a better idea than them about what was going on and what needed to happen next. I could also tell you about the number of times I've seen that not produce the best leadership outcomes in practice – either because the de facto leader should have made it clear they didn't want that particular role, or because everybody else had unreasonable expectations of their suitability for the role. When they don't deliver, because they weren't the right person for the role in the first place, the others either openly turn on them, or find all sorts of creative ways to *not* support them.

There's one critical thing that turning on the leader doesn't say – that's who else is going to step up into the role. Somehow, taking shots at somebody else is always a lot easier than putting your own leadership on the line. It's almost as though the people who are prepared to take the shots – as opposed to putting forward constructive alternatives – understand this and are deliberately choosing not to put themselves in situations where they are likely to be strongly challenged. That's definitely

one way of managing the likelihood that others won't like you, but it's also a good reason why they might not like you in the first place.

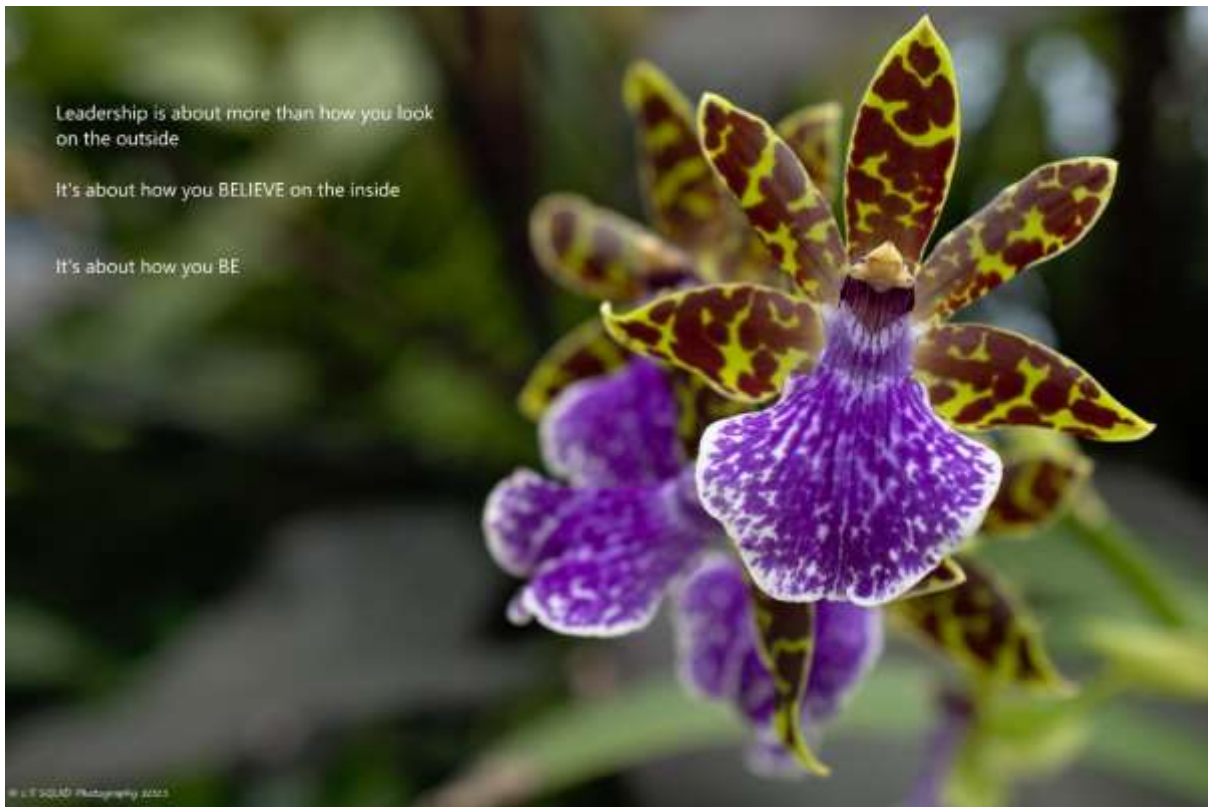
True leadership is about how you BE. It's about how you feel inside yourself. Are you comfortable with assuming a level of responsibility for yourself, rather than expecting other people to make decisions for you? Are you comfortable with assuming a level of responsibility for others, helping to guide and coach them to be the best they can be with their contributions to the project, the team and, most importantly, to themselves?

It is about expecting nothing of others that you don't expect of yourself. What you say and what you do are in harmony with each other. Being there to support and grow your people is simply who you are. The real beauty of a team lies not only in the tangible results you deliver, but also in who you become together.

I'm not telling you that leadership has to be a lonely place. Being popular within your team is an OK thing. Just don't pursue being popular at the expense of being a leader.

Advice

- Leadership is about doing what's right, *because it's right*, even when nobody's watching. It's also about continuing to do what's right when others don't understand, or when they challenge you.
- If you want to be the leader simply because you want to be the leader, rather than because you've got something special to offer to the team, you should probably think again because effective leadership isn't just about your own ego.
- Being liked by everybody isn't a sole criterion for selecting somebody into a leadership role. While it obviously helps if the leader is a likeable person, that's not the same as saying they need to be everybody's bosom buddy. I would argue it's equally important that the leader treats everybody with respect and values them for who they are
- Trying to be the expert in everything is not real leadership. Be an expert in the things you genuinely are an expert in; be open to learning more – no matter who you learn it from – in the areas where you aren't so strong. This will set a great example for others in your team.
- If you – for whatever reason – don't want to take the formal leadership role yourself, that's perfectly OK. Not everybody wants to fill that role or may be ready for it in the context of a particular team or project. Speak up and say so – don't assume that others just know this about you.
- Remember that you can't force somebody to be a leader if they don't want to be. If you *are* trying to force somebody else into that role, it's a good time to question your own motives for doing that.
- If no one member puts their hand up for taking sole leadership of the team, you could operate with a distributed leadership model. While conventional wisdom is that leadership sits with a single team member, there's nothing stopping you trying a different approach as a way of ensuring you don't end up leaderless.



Real leadership is more than skin deep – it goes right to the heart of who you are, and it's reflected in everything you do.

Transaction versus Transformation

Something you've probably come across in some of your other courses is the difference between transactional and transformational leadership. I think it's equally applicable if you are talking about management as well, and I hope you'll see why in a minute or two.

At its simplest, a transactional person is most comfortable following an established process in stable situations, where the outcomes are predictable. Not only are the processes laid out, simply needing to be followed, so are the consequences that happen if the performance doesn't match the process and the outcome doesn't meet expectations. We're talking about – hopefully – some sort of investigation into the *facts* of what happened before – unfortunately – some sort of disciplinary process.

My experience, over a great many projects and teams, is that the process – where there appears to be one at all – is often incomplete, lacking transparency, biased, hurried, and based on pre-determined outcomes. When *any* of these things happens – or worse, if more than one of them happens in combination:

- The person in charge relying on the disciplinary end of the process as a means of enforcing compliance with standards that are often ill-defined, poorly communicated, sometimes even inappropriate – because they either don't know anything else is possible, or because they don't believe they have the scope or the authority to do anything different.
- The transactional person-in-charge learns to hate the people carrying out the transactions because of their perceived inability to take the initiative and to operate without close supervision, coupled with their resistance to punishment and perceived unwillingness to learn from previous mistakes.
- The people on the receiving end of this transactional approach learn to hate an approach that seems disinterested in their ability to think and put forward reasoned alternatives, or to take the initiative when this would be a reasonable or even necessary thing to do.
- More than just hating the transactional approach, the people on the receiving end learn to hate the transaction-master or -mistress – their perceived reliance on punishment instead of support has been known to encourage Li/MiTs to go to extraordinary lengths to hide instances where they have deviated from the transactional processes in order to minimise the likelihood or severity of punishment.

What we have here, then is a situation that is a self-reinforcing cycle of disaster, built on a foundation of distrust and topped off with a layer of inevitability. It's not the only way things can go, though. If all this seems a bit “doom, gloom, and disaster”, there is another alternative – the transformational mindset. Transformational people approach things quite differently. Yes, they understand the need for systems and processes, but they also understand the need for creativity and innovation. That understanding comes through in ways such as:

- Having a mindset that says more things are possible than impossible Just because they haven't done something before is not the same as saying they can't do it now or in the future – it just means they haven't found the way yet.
- They believe that their team members will be capable of achieving all the tasks they are allocated to an appropriately high standard, even the ones that stretch them beyond what they might think they are capable of at the start of the project.

- They act as the Believer-Encourager in the team, making sure that everybody else in the team knows how capable they are, and that they have support around them if there's anything they aren't confident with. Regardless of the idealised needs of the project, they can work around people developing their Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and **ATTITUDES** at a pace they can handle
- Transformers live the belief and encouragement in everything they say and do. They really understand at quite a deep level the power of the example they set to others, and this is completely independent of whether they hold a formal leadership role in the team or not.

If there's one thing that my experience with project teams tells me, it's that while transformers often make great leaders, it's not necessary to be a leader to be a transformer. Some of the most transformative people I've ever experienced or observed as part of project teams haven't had formal leadership roles. In case you're thinking that might put the leader's position under threat – and I don't say it never would – I've never seen it happen myself. Non-leader transformers act as supports to the formal leaders, helping them to multiply their influence through others rather than challenging them. Not every transformer needs to be Numero Uno in a hierarchy in order to be their most effective.

Advice

- Any project is automatically a self-development project. No matter how big or small the changes are, something will change in you, whether it be in your hard or soft skills, or just your **ATTITUDE** in general. Don't force the changes; but be open to letting them happen, because you might get a really good surprise when you discover there are things you are way better at than you thought you were; or could be.
- Be wary of people trying to force you to change in a way, or at a pace you aren't comfortable with. Yes, overall you will need to fit in with the project timeline, but that doesn't have to come at the cost of feeling like your comfort zone has been completely taken away from you. If the pace or the extent of change aren't "right" for you, speak up. I know some of you will say: *"That's really easy to say and hard to do, because you don't want anybody in the team getting the impression you're the 'weakest link'."* The reality is that not speaking up simply increases your chances of *actually* being the weakest link.
- Be wary of trying to force somebody else to change in a way, or at a pace they aren't comfortable with. The best way to avoid this is to get to know each of your people as humans – the better you know them. Make it possible for them to tell you what they think and feel about what is happening to them; and be guided by what they tell you. Both transactions and transformations will be more effective when people think they are going to be supported rather than being negatively judged.
- Understand that there is a place and time in every project and every team for both transactional and transformational approaches. Your ongoing experience will tell you which one is most appropriate at any time. Be prepared for your judgements to change over the course of the project as everybody learns more about what they are capable of and comfortable with. There is no "one-size-fits-all" answer to this; nor is there any shortcut – it's something you simply have to learn by doing.

BLOOM?

Bodacious Leader or Outstanding Manager? No matter what your role is, turn up determined to be the best you can be. This is a really important point because you aren't on this journey alone. Other people are going to be looking to you for clues about expected (and accepted) behaviours. Whether you have a *formal* leadership or management role doesn't determine whether you should aim to be the best you can be at what you do. I will always argue that being the best you can be is simply a non-negotiable expectation. If you aren't prepared to do this – and that's different from being prevented from doing so by some external circumstance you have no influence over – you should really be reflecting on whether a collaborative project space is the appropriate space for you *at this time*.

Let's assume that you've decided you are in the right space – here's a few other thoughts you ought to be having:

You're probably familiar with the concept of situational leadership, which says that the leader changes their approach to others based on the circumstances at the time. On the plus side, this should mean that the leader's approach is the most appropriate match for the circumstances. On the minus side, this can be really confusing for followers, depending on how frequently the leader changes approaches, and how significant the changes are. My experience is that most people – myself included – like a reasonable degree of consistency in how they are being led. If they don't feel they've got that, you might find more energy going into attempting to predict the leader's next situational shift and preparing for it than actually getting their own work done.

This is one of the big challenges of leadership. Theory says you should try to lead each of your team members the way they want to be led – rather than arbitrarily the way you want to lead. From a purely practical perspective you need to have *some* consistency across the way they are all led, because your role is not just about making each of them feel good – it's *also* about creating an environment where work can get done.

You've probably been trained to think of leadership or management as things that are done with or to other people. I won't argue against that, but it's only telling half the story. The other half – and arguably the more important half – is about self-leadership and self-management. There is somebody seriously awesome inside you, and now is your time to show the world what you are made of. Perhaps more importantly, it's time to show **you** what you are made of. If you are going to take somebody else on a journey with you, they will follow or comply much more willingly because they sense you believe in yourself and your ability to do the things you say.

As your team starts to grow in confidence and achieve the targets you set – preferably collaboratively - the more confidence you start developing because of your part in what's happening. This becomes a self-reinforcing process – success is really additive (not just addictive).

Let's assume you don't want a *formal leadership* role – you'd rather just get on with some work and let somebody else carry the leadership load. That's perfectly OK – nobody can force you to be a leader if that's not right for you at the time. The reality in a small project team – like the one you're a part of – is that you won't just be doing something; you'll be managing how it gets done. Virtually everything I've just said about leadership also applies to managership. If that's the role you are in, and you want to do the littlest possible, don't be surprised when you end up exited from the team. The easiest way to avoid this is by giving your work your best shot. It's not just your results that make you outstanding

in your role – commitment is the one thing that can't ever be faked and doesn't come as a result of luck.

Advice

- Make the commitment to be the best you can be at whatever role you play in your team. While others will benefit from your commitment, making it is not *about them*.
- While others can encourage you to make this commitment, they can't make it for you.
- If you aren't prepared to make that commitment to yourself, you need to ask why not – and then you need to do something about it.
 - In the most extreme scenario, this might mean stepping away from the team, the project, or even the course itself until such time as you are able to make that commitment.
- Set an example to the people you are responsible for leading or managing through your thinking and behaviour. Expect nothing less of yourself than you expect of them because, if there is a `disconnect` between what you say and what you do, it's what you do they are more likely to follow.
- If something doesn't go quite the way you intended, look for the positive learning to build on for next time, rather than mentally "beating yourself up" (or anybody else, for that matter). A positive focus is literally priceless in terms of what it enables individuals or a team to accomplish.



Whatever role you play in your team, make a commitment to being BLOOMing marvellous at it.

Management By Walking Around (MBWA) versus Leading By Checking In (LBCI)

The management and leadership textbooks talk about Management By Walking Around – in other words, whoever is running an organisation, department, team or project should get out of their office and literally walk around to where their people are so they can observe and interact with them where the work is being done. Let's think about what the "Management" part of this model might mean. Perhaps your experience in the past has been the Course Facilitator walking around the room looking to catch people *not* doing what they are meant to be doing so they can haul them back into line somehow.

You know that feels uncomfortable, even if you are exactly on task, never mind if you are having problems with a task. Let's turn that negative message into something more positive because, frankly, the time and emotional energy that goes into micro-management to catch "wrongness" would be better invested in actually trusting and supporting your people.

MBWA might have worked when everybody was pretty much together in the same, or closely-linked physical spaces. It's becoming more common – and this is not entirely caused by restrictions linked to dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic – for team members to be working in different physical spaces. That might be a good thing that we've seen technology enable, because it means that the ability to do project work (unless it requires specialist resources that only exist in one place) has a lot of flexibility to it. How does MBWA work if your people aren't all in the same space?

If I had my way, I would change MBWA to Leadership By Checking In (LBCI). Here's the positive change. You use technology to check in with people – a structured schedule (which you created as part of your project planning anyway) is good for this because it enables people to plan their work around regular reporting times. You can have a more relaxed conversation about progress and issues without having to literally peer over somebody's shoulder. People who don't feel like they are being watched every moment and every part of the task can take their previous defensive energy and invest it in doing better work and enjoying themselves more while they are doing it.

LBCI is about catching people doing the right things – not the wrong things – making sure they know it's appreciated; and checking what other support or resources they might need. It's also about the conversations that aren't formally scheduled, because when people feel comfortable having those it says there's a lot of trust between your members, and that's a space where you want to be spending as much time as possible.

Everybody will have a different tolerance level before they decide that checking in has become micro-management. That's why it's important to get to know the people you're working alongside, to make sure you know what their trigger points are.

Advice

- It's a lot easier than most people might think to catch people doing good stuff. The reason for this is that most people actually care about doing what they do well. Sure, you might have a member who thinks that "near enough is good enough" but that's simply a disagreement over what's really acceptable for the project rather than somebody saying they don't care about doing good work. Start out with a positive mindset and the positive examples will reveal themselves because you were always meant to see them.

- Micro-managing simply invites people to get dramatic on both sides. If you're following what you've set out in your Standard Operating Procedures, hopefully that's going to reduce the likelihood of it happening in the first place. Notice I didn't say "guaranteed", because it's something you will need to monitor to make sure you aren't slipping into bad habits...
- Checking In isn't something that only the Team Leader does – it's something that any member can do with any other member. It's a great way of identifying issues and dealing with them while they are still small – providing members trust each other enough that they don't feel they need to hide anything from each other.



Whether in classrooms or diverse workplace settings, I have sometimes lived in gear of the MBWA practitioner appearing like some sort of apparition out of the darkness. That's not because I was doing the wrong things; or doing the right things badly – it's more a belief about this person always looking for the smallest negative to pull me up on; never the positive to recognise me for. I learned what to hide so they would see what they wanted to see and leave me alone. That meant they would go and pick on somebody else.

These people were never a part of the team. Instead, they were apart from it. They commanded performance through fear of the consequences of displeasing them, but they never earned or received loyalty. The leaders I've respected most, and aspects of whose behaviour I have tried to incorporate into my own, have always been those who Checked In. Supporting people actually takes way less effort than it does to look for ways to catch them out or to punish them.

Section B: Putting your team together

In which I talk about the importance of playing together nicely...

Playing together nicely

If you don't already know it, one of the things you are shortly to discover about your fellow human beings is that *they can be incredibly frustrating*. There will be times when *some* of them do things that get you *really* annoyed. Let's be fair, though – there will probably be times when *you* do things that really annoy *them*. This is just the nature of bringing disparate humans together – we have to learn about each other at the same time we're trying to get to grips with scoping and running a project that may be bigger and more complex than anything we've done before. Then there's all the other stuff happening in life that somehow manages to impact on how much time and attention people *choose* to give to the project, as well as the ways in which they react to their fellow team members

Part of the reality you're dealing with is how to end up in a team with the "best people". If you're not already there when you're reading this, chances are you've figured out you need to tell people how wonderful you are as part of making that happen. Another part of that reality is ensuring that what gets said about behaviour is what happens in practice, because my experience is that so many problems happen when there is a difference between the two. What I'm talking about here isn't the one-off "snap" – we've probably all had some of those, and then genuinely regretted it immediately. We apologise, learn from it, and move on.

What I'm meaning are the actions that are *consistently* different to what people said. The actions that go beyond being reasonable – that lead to the likes of childishly giving people the sustained silent treatment because you didn't like something they said or did, right through to "getting in somebody else's face" to the point where physical violence is a very real possibility if somebody doesn't step in the middle to give people a moment to pause before they do something they're going to regret. Before you ask, yes, I've had to step in the middle more than once... These things don't make for a pleasant or safe working environment, so nobody in their right mind wants them to happen.

So – how do you deal with this – without over-regulating acceptable behaviours and turning into absolute control freaks?

Advice

- When you're putting a team together, make sure you tell the truth about how you normally work. If you act outside that story, this will usually be discovered pretty quickly, and you can't guarantee that discovery will always be dealt with in a professional and constructive manner. Simply avoid the problem by telling the truth about how you work.
- Just accept that everybody else in the team isn't a carbon copy of you. They don't have to be - in fact, you're going to learn a lot more about people in general and you in particular, not to mention scoping and executing an awesome project, because they *are* different to you. The more different ways of thinking that are *brought to* the table, the more everybody can *take from* the experience. That's especially true where there's more than one way to do something – be brave enough to accept that your way of doing something might stand some improvement. That's not saying your current way is "bad" – just that "the best way" is a constantly evolving target.
- Before you launch into somebody else for their behaviour, have a look into the mental mirror at your own. Nobody's perfect. If you've done things similar to what you're going to call somebody else out for, just think about what was happening for you at the time, and how you reacted when somebody else called you out. Only then should you speak or write the

words you are thinking...once those words are out there, you can apologise for them, but you can't make them go away.

- Think about what **you** could do to help a member to improve their performance. Not just the things you would do because the team's formal rules committed you to doing them, but what you could do *because it's the right thing to do*.
- For anybody who really doesn't care too much about anybody else – that's why you have Standard Operating Procedures that **you** design and all sign up to. Work your way through the process, don't be afraid to escalate for outside assistance – your Course Facilitator – if you aren't getting anywhere. In the worst-case scenario, don't be afraid to exercise the ultimate sanction and exit somebody from the team. As tough as that might be at the time, you don't get any prizes for keeping somebody around who's clearly demonstrated that they either can't or won't play by the rules.



Playing together nicely shines a collective light on what is possible.

Collaborative assessment

Something that's a combination of scary and confusing, especially if you haven't come across it before, is the idea of collaborative assessment. This is where some of your final course marks are allocated by your fellow team members rather than all of them being allocated by the Course Facilitator. I know what you're thinking: *"What qualifies these people to sit in judgement on me?"* The answer to that comes in two parts:

1. The same thing that qualifies *you* to sit in judgement on *their* performance – you shared experiences as part of the same project.
2. Your Course Facilitator probably only sees you for a few hours a week. During that time what they get is the performance you want them to see. What you get with each other for the rest of the time you are working on the project is the *real* performance.

The reality is that it's impossible to work with people for any length of time without having some thoughts about their performance. Sometimes those thoughts might be emotional and subjective. Sometimes they might be a bit more objective – it depends on the relationships you have with your team-mates, and even what's happening at the time.

In the workplace, you're going to be evaluated by your managers – that's a standard workplace practice. Maybe your workplace might get you to evaluate your managers' performance as well. Maybe you will end up in some sort of management position at some point where you have to evaluate your team members. What you've got here is an opportunity to develop the skill in a supportive environment – and where you will probably have a reasonable amount of input into deciding and designing your evaluation questions and criteria.

What fixed ideas do you have about people, and about what behaviour and performance are acceptable in your team? Where did you get these ideas from? How do you know anything that supports these ideas in your own mind is true in the context of this particular project and the people in your team? Are you prepared to change your mind on any of these ideas if you get information that conflicts with your original position? Lots of questions here, and the answers will be as unique as each individual in the team. Whether you do it openly or privately, you need to answer these as part of your process here.

Getting your evaluation questions and criteria "right" is a really important conversation you need to have fairly early on in the life of your team. What you don't want is for there to be any surprises at the end of the course, or any other time when you need to be doing the formal evaluations. You could just go and download a template from the interweb – but that's not doing a lot for you because you are trying to fit a generic set of questions and criteria to your specific circumstances. Think about how you could modify what you found so it's the best possible match for what you need.

I've had people approach me fairly late in the life of the project and ask me: *"Do we have to give Little Johnny/Little Suzy a mark for their performance? They've been so awful; we really think they should get less than zero if that's possible. If it's not possible, are you OK with us giving them zero for all the questions?"* What usually lies behind questions like this is a problem that's existed within the team for a long time and not been resolved. It's like this is everybody else's opportunity to beat up on Johnny/Suzy because *nobody* was able to solve the problem. None of the people that have asked me this question have ever, to my knowledge, done what they asked about. There's always been

something positive found in Johnny's/Suzy's performance in the end that justifies them earning *some* marks.

Another question that's often raised with collaborative assessments is around Li/MiTs just giving each other full marks for everything, effectively turning collaborative assessment results into "marks for nothing." You might even think you are clever enough to get away with it if you try this. There's no such thing as "free marks" – because you're going to have to provide *evidence* to back up the numbers. That means *actual examples* of what Johnny/Suzy did or didn't do to demonstrate why the feedback you gave them is reasonable under the circumstances. The examples and the explanations that go with them are Learning Moments for the people on both the giving and receiving ends.

Something I've always thought is incredibly important is something that very few teams, in my experience do. That's to discuss **in the open** the feedback that everybody is going to give on anybody else. It's like they are still trapped in this mindset that says talking about people has to be done in secret in case anybody doesn't like what is being said about them. Why are they saying something they aren't prepared to say to somebody's face? Think about this: It's probably only because the word "assessment" is involved that they're going all "Secret Squirrel" with each other. Before that, most of them will have spent the whole duration of the project telling each other what they think, and probably why as well.

If you're brave enough to have an opinion about somebody's performance, you can be brave enough to "own" it to their face.

Advice

- Think about the questions that you're going to ask and how you could measure the answers. This should be a collective thinking and collective decision process because you are all going to be subjected to the same process.
- Be honest enough to identify any biases you might have in the way you think about others. Think about how you are going to deal with those so that you can keep your evaluations as objective as possible.
- Keep some sort of permanent record of key events that have happened and what your reactions were. Traditionally, this would have been some sort of written diary, but there's no reason why it has to be that if you've got some other sort of format that works for you. The real value of this is when you record things as soon as possible after they've happened – the longer you leave it after the event until you do this, the greater the chances that your memories and your analysis of what they mean will be less accurate.
- While everybody's performance has probably got something that could be improved if you could wind the clock back and start over – and some of those areas for improvement might be more substantial than others – don't let any negatives blind you to the positives. There is always something that you can genuinely complement somebody for.
- If you're going to sit around and discuss the feedback everybody is getting from others in the team, you might want to think seriously about having some ground rules for this. These could include things like:
 - How you felt about things that happened is valid – it's your lived experience.
 - Talk about performance issues rather than attacking the person.
 - Offer constructive suggestions for the future – for both things that were done well and things that could have been done differently. Helping is much better than hurting.

Forming a team

You're in a situation where working in a team isn't optional. There are two main ways for this to happen. Either somebody else allocates members to the team, and you don't have any choice in the allocation, or you make your own choices. Over the years, I've worked with people who are strong proponents of each approach. My experience, however, has been almost entirely with self-choice teams, so that's the approach I'm going to discuss here.

Put a room full of Li/MiTs together, tell them they need to form teams, and almost immediately some of them will be paying more attention to their fellow cohort members than to what's being said in the rest of the briefing. They will be trying to answer questions such as, but not necessarily limited to:

- Is there anybody here I really *don't* want to work with, and what am I prepared to do to avoid that possibility? *You can insert your own reasons (real or imagined) why here.*
- Is there anybody I know that I've heard good things about, and I might be OK to work with? *What exactly have I heard, and how much do I trust that information?*
- Is there anybody here that I definitely want to work with because I've heard they are awesomely clever, and they always score really high marks? *Will they carry me along with them?*
- Who in this room looks like my kind of person? *You can insert your own description of what "your kind of person" looks like.*
- Can't I just get into a team with my friends? *Problem solved.*
- What do I bring to the table that makes me come across as a desirable team member? *I have to do a really good "sell job" on myself, because I don't want to be stuck in a team with all the losers that nobody else wants to work with.*

Whoever you choose, or are chosen by, you are going to have to work with these people for the duration of the project if you are going to successfully complete this course. Jumping between teams and projects isn't a realistic possibility, and you don't want to develop a reputation as somebody that can't go the distance. That means you need to make a careful choice, and there's a process that will help you to do just that.

When the time comes for everybody in the cohort to introduce themselves, say something about the sorts of people they would ideally like to work with, and do a little "sell job" on why they will be a great person to work with, listen carefully. Better still, take notes, so you aren't having to rely solely on memory when it comes to deciding who to approach. You also need to tell the truth about the knowledge, skills, abilities, and **ATTITUDE** you offer to a team; not promising things that aren't true, and that you know you can't deliver.

When you have the opportunity, make sure you ask questions to clarify any points you were uncertain about. This is how you avoid making decisions based on assumptions, and I'll talk more about assumptions later on.

If you've already made your mind up about who you want to join with, you might not want to hear this next point: Try to avoid forming a team where you are all strong at the same things, because it means you're all going to have the same weaknesses. The most effective teams have a collection of complementary strengths as opposed to identical ones. Doing this is a good way of reducing the effects of any weak areas.

If you could win a medal, would you want to win it for getting into a team faster than anybody else, or for taking the time to get into a team where everybody in it is confident they've made a good choice about being together? The reality is that team formation speed is one area where there isn't a medal for being first. That doesn't mean quick decisions can't also be good decisions – just that you don't *need* to give in to any imaginary pressure to be fast.

Advice

- Honestly challenge any assumptions, pre-conceived ideas or prejudices before you make any final decisions about who you are going to team up with.
- Tell the truth about yourself, the way you like to work, and the kinds of people you would be most comfortable working with.
- Take some time to think about what others have said about themselves and how they like to work. This reduces the number of people you need to explore possibilities with.
- If you turn anybody's initial approach to work together down, do it with respect – you can't guarantee there won't come a time when it's a conversation you might want to have again if circumstances change.
- If somebody turns you request to work together down, treat their decision with respect, even if you don't like it. Reflect on any reasons they gave for their decision – maybe there's some really helpful feedback in there if you can get past your initial emotional reaction.



*Regardless of what you intend for your team to be like, or what it looks like "on paper", your real character will be forged in the heat of the project. It's in the **real** events that you discover everybody's unique connection between **ATTITUDE** and performance. Only there can you know how well your choices were made.*

What's your Superpower?

The last question I've always asked at the end of a project presentation is one where the answer can't be scripted or copied from any other source. It's this: *"From all your experiences working on this project and in this team, what do you think is the most important thing you've learned, and how do you think that will help you in the future?"* The answer requires Li/MiTs to reflect beyond the hard (technical) skills they've had to use in the project and also think about the soft (interpersonal) skills. It's a question they probably weren't expecting. Answers will be as individual as the people giving them. Despite the fact they've known there's an autoethnographic reflection as the final assessment for the course, this might be the first time they've actually stopped and thought about what their answer might be. If I'd thought about things slightly differently, I might have asked them *"What's your superpower?"*

This is one of my favourite questions at the end of the Blowing Bubbles show that my Lead Mentor, Samuel Mann, fronts on Otago Access Radio. The one answer I've never heard from anybody is that they can be everywhere, for everybody, all the time, doing everything. Looking back, I wish I had learned this lesson as well as I thought I taught it to others.

Teams work best when their people work. That's a simple reality, but what underlies it is how that work is done. Through virtually all of my formal compulsory schooling, the message was that success would come from *hard* work. What I've discovered in the years since is that kind of success is often accidental and short-term. Longer-lasting and deliberate success comes from working smarter. One of the smartest things and, therefore, most valuable superpowers anybody can have – either as a leader or a follower - is being able to Prioritise:

- Yourself as a leader – you don't need to be in control of everything and everybody. People get better at doing things quicker from having the experience of doing them than they do having things done for them. That might be hard for you to hear as a leader, especially if you think you know the best way to do a task, but you need to tolerate the fact they'll do it slower than you would, and with a lot less confidence *at first*. Coach them when you need to and then step aside and let them get on with the doing. This will not only help build their confidence in doing what they've been tasked with, but also give you more time to do the specialist things that really demand your attention.
- Yourself as a person – by taking some "Me Time" on a regular basis. The concept of Tea Time-Me Time is something I was introduced to by my friend, fellow DPP learning mate and unofficial mentor, Vicki-Maree Yarker-Jones. You deserve to practice self-care, because investing yourselves 24/7 in your work puts you on an inevitable road to burnout. Sometimes you might need to take a break, away from anything to do with the project. Use the time to celebrate what it means to be you and what you bring to the team.
- Sometimes you might decide to do this as a team – just grab a coffee or a tea, something nice to nibble on and let yourselves relax. It's a great opportunity to celebrate the good things you all bring to the team and make sure that everybody knows how much you value them. Let those positive feelings out rather than keeping them hidden – you have no idea how much somebody else might need to hear what you have to tell them.

To be an effective team member – no matter what your role – means there's no opportunity for hiding in plain sight. If you are part of the team, *you are involved*. The team is as good as each one of you makes it. If you're still here for the second session, after the praxis shock of the first one, that says

something good about just how awesome you really are. Don't ask me how good – it's going to take the rest of the project to discover that. All I know is this: No matter how good you might think you are right now; I know you are so much more than that.

Enjoy your adventure.

Advice

- When you think about the idea of a “superpower”, it doesn't have to be the sort of power that heroes – or villains – in comic books or movies have. It's OK, and probably more relevant to what you are doing, to have something you are really good at doing that's a reason why people would want to work in a team with you. It doesn't even have to be one of the hard skills necessary to complete the technical parts of your project, although those are always important. It could be a soft skill that helps other people do what they need to do and feel like they matter.
- If you already knew what your superpower was before the start of the project, your whole experience here might be about confirming just how strong and important that power is. Even if you thought you knew what it was, that doesn't mean you can't make new discoveries, so don't trap yourself into thinking that you can't be anything more than you already are.
- It's a really useful idea to keep a diary, or some form of ongoing and permanent record not just of what you've done, but also of how you've felt about it. This covers you reactions to the things you've done and also to things that your team-mates have done.
- It's a good idea to record events and reactions while they are still fresh in your mind. The longer you leave it to do this, the more chance that your memories won't match what actually happened. Leave it long enough and there's a good chance you will be making the story up as you go because you have no memory of what actually happened. Capture the richness in the moment while it's there – the quality of your reflection could be your genuine superpower.
- I can't tell you what your individual superpower is, no matter how well I might have known you in the past. This project adventure is about you discovering that for yourselves. It might be confirming something you already thought, or it might be a completely new discovery. Treasure it when you are sure what it is because it's part of what defines who you are as a unique and valuable human being.

Best friendship isn't the same as best team membership

One of the classic temptations when you have to form a project team, and you have free choice over who ends up in it, is to choose your friends. Better still is being able to choose your *best* friend. You know these people. They won't let you down. Even better still, you avoid being stuck with the people you really *don't* want to be in a team with (for whatever reasons, real or imagined).

Let me ask you some questions before we go any further. Are you so confident in its strength that you are prepared to put your friendship on the line? What will you do if your friend doesn't do what they say they will? Are you prepared, for the sake of the project and the team, to make the sort of hard decisions that are different to the ones you would make as a friend? If you don't know, or you definitely don't want to put friendship to the test, you'd better make sure you don't end up on the same team.

No matter what you think at the start, there are likely to be times ahead that test your tolerance of your team-mates and their performance to the limit. No matter how zen you say you are in order to get into a team, the reality can be quite different to the way you planned for the project to run.

Maybe you have no intention of taking formal leadership of the team – you just want to be in a team where you won't have to work too hard, and you figure your friends will take it easy on you. The reality is that the team has a job of work to do. You cruising in plain sight won't help to achieve that, and it's probably not going to take too long for at least some of the others in the team to get annoyed with you. Unless this is addressed quickly, energy that should go into the project will be diverted into dissatisfaction and interpersonal conflict that **will** threaten to tear the team apart.

Advice

- Think about the knowledge and skillsets the project needs for it to be completed successfully **before** you make final decisions about team membership.
- Be **honest** about whether you and your friends, in combination, have that combination between you.
- When you are putting the rules together for how the team is going to operate, focus on the project and the team.
- If you do decide to work together in a team – and there's nothing that absolutely prevents this – have a conversation right up front about the boundaries that you're going to set between team membership and friendship.

Role Descriptions

If you think these are overkill for a small project team working on a project like yours – think again. Perhaps you think the time spent creating role descriptions is time that would be better spent working on the project itself; just imagine what would happen if everybody in the team did what they thought they should do. There's a good chance you'd find some – easy – tasks were duplicated by multiple people, while some - difficult – tasks were avoided by most people, if not by everybody. Often this happens because members *imagine* they know what a task or set of tasks requires, without actually being sure. Equally, their imagination may tempt them into being risk-averse. If you want members to take on responsibility, it stands to reason they will be more willing to do this if they know what a role will involve them in being responsible for.

The first role that is usually thought about is that of leadership. How much power do you think a formally-appointed leader should have? Are there any guidelines or limits on how you think they should be able to exercise that power? These are some really basic questions, but nobody should be accepting the role unless the answers have been clearly specified. Equally, for people who don't want that particular role themselves, you have to think about how comfortable you're likely to be being led by somebody operating according to whatever you decide the answers to those questions are.

In all my years of working with Li/MiT project teams, I've only come across two teams of three that managed to operate with a distributed leadership model – that is, they shared the leadership responsibility pretty much equally between the three members, without anybody having the word "Leader" in their formal titles. In the nicest possible way, those people were freaks of nature. They understood each other so well probably because they'd worked together for smaller assignments on other courses; they understood that leadership was about getting things done with people, and that it wasn't an ego contest. They put forward strong cases for me to let them try things their way. Of the thousands (literally) of others I've worked with over the years, so many have proved why formally defined roles (and rules) are necessary.

Similar questions will apply to every other role that a team decides is necessary for it to complete its project. Think about the different tasks that your team needs to perform to bring your project to a successful conclusion. OK – so you've given each member a title that indicates their area/s of primary responsibility – now what? You need to work out what that person's responsible for delivering – and that means breaking big tasks down into smaller chunks so you can start to see the detail. Not only will this reveal the basis for Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for each role; it will also indicate whether a role has so much work involved that it should be split across multiple members. Where you decide to split a role, you need to think about exactly how that split will occur – and you need to do this before the substantive work of the project starts.

Unless your team is full of super-people who are all equally wonderful at doing every task, it makes sense to allocate primary responsibility for tasks to members who've indicated either passion or skills in a particular area. Where you have a task for which nobody's expressed passion or skill, it's possibly a good opportunity to split a task, or set of related tasks, so that no one member gets stuck with something tough all on their own.

I've always been a big fan of having more than one member responsible for a particular task area. The member with primary responsibility leads the work on that part of the project. Any other members with a formal responsibility in that area is effectively being developed by the primary member. This ensures that if anything happens to the primary member, there isn't going to be a leadership gap in

that area. It's also a professional development activity for both the leader and the member being developed.

I recommend being highly collaborative when it comes to connecting all the different parts of the project into a coherent whole. That doesn't mean one member gets stuck with the task of collating all the different pieces of work at the last minute and trying to make sure that each part meets the necessary quality standards, leads logically to the next, and that there's consistent formatting between them all. One pair of eyes is only going to see what one pair of eyes sees. Multiple pairs of eyes will see the same things from different views, so, collation of project artefacts and quality control is a role that should ideally be allocated to everybody in the team.

Advice

- Role descriptions are useful because they make it clear to everybody what they are responsible and accountable for doing.
- The more detailed the role descriptions are at the start of a team's life, the less there is to argue about later. Any differences in understanding can be clarified before substantive project work starts. Balanced against that, you want to leave sufficient flexibility in them that you don't have to spend time continually rewriting them to cope with evolving circumstances.
- They are a lot easier to write if members are open about where their passion and skills lie. While they allow you to take full advantage of the Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs) that exist in the team, don't let working out how to do this blind you to the gaps that might still be there between what members have and what the project is going to need.
- It's important to address those gaps and build how that will be done into the role descriptions. *In the `real world` some of that detail would appear in a Person Description, but I've included it here because these are often not written as part of Li/MIT projects in an `academic` setting.*
- Record them in writing, including that date at which they were agreed to be current. This means they form a defined benchmark.
- Get members to sign their role descriptions. This indicates their ownership of them, and that they agree to be held accountable for operating in alignment with them.
- Store them somewhere they can be easily referred back to if necessary.
- Role descriptions can always be changed if what happens in practice differs significantly from the documentation – but that doesn't mean you leave them so flexible in the first place that they will never need amendment.
- If any changes are made, repeat the formal documentation process and agreement process.

The Rules (Standard Operating Procedures)

In a perfect world, there would never be a problem that a team could not resolve between themselves in perfect harmony, because the team is bigger than any individual ego. In all my years in the game, though, I've only ever met two teams of three that ever managed to pull this off. I told them – and I meant this in the nicest possible way – that they were freaks of nature

For the *thousands* of other Li/MiTs I've worked with individuals, or even whole teams, ask me why they need to create a set of rules to run a project team. After all, they are all adults (chronologically, at least), and they know how to behave. In fact, let's go one step further – there isn't anybody they can't get along with. If they have to create – and then follow – formal rules, that's just going to get in the way of them doing what they need to do on the project. Why make their lives harder than they need to be?

Unless it's your family, you know that part of the price of admission to any organisation is agreeing to follow their rules, and then making sure you actually *do* follow them. You generally don't get any choice about what is in the rules and they can often be quite prescriptive, with little room for interpreting what they mean. Because you know you have to agree to all the rules, you probably don't read them all in depth; maybe you make some assumptions about what's in them without actually familiarising yourself with them...then you wonder why you get in trouble for breaking the rules you didn't pay attention to...

The reality is your project is about doing a job of work, and work comes with rules. Regardless of what you call them, you need to make sure you know what the rules are for the way the team is going to run – and that you've all agreed to them after having had the chance for constructive input (although the input opportunity may not be there if you join the team after the project has started)

Sometimes when I've had to step into the middle of issues within project teams, or even between multiple teams working on different parts of the same project, it's been by invitation. On odd occasions I've invited myself in because it's obvious people are getting themselves into a situation where they aren't going to resolve a problem on their own. The first thing I usually do is ask to see a copy of the rules governing how the team is *meant to be* operating. In my experience most problems, but particularly those at an operational level, are because of:

- The rules being incomplete, or changes to them not being communicated to everybody who needed to know about them.
- Creative interpretation of the rules, particularly where they have been silent over whether or not something was acceptable; or
- The rules have been ignored, either inadvertently or deliberately.

Seeing the rules means I can see where the problem is likely to lie, and that helps me ask the right questions to guide team members towards a solution they can not only feel comfortable with but can also implement relatively easily themselves. Questions and answers are important because effective solutions rarely come from dealing in assumptions. You'd be surprised how many things it's possible to disagree on in a team – no matter what you all have to say when you are being sweetness and light because you want to get into a team that's capable of producing good results. Some of the really basic ones are:

- Who will be responsible for what? The answer to this question goes together with the role descriptions. Some tasks might be the sole responsibility of one person, while others may be

split across multiple people. What works for your particular team will be determined by what the project is and the skillsets of the people in the team. You need to have honest conversations in your team about what each of you is *really* capable of – don't tell people what you think they want to hear or show them what you think they want to see if it's not true. You will be found out sooner rather than later, and the grief that comes from lying just isn't worth it.

- What are your acceptable performance standards? The answer to this will apply to both quantity and quality of work. I've seen teams come close to self-destruction over this because they made undocumented assumptions about what everybody would know in common – and then started making judgements against members that weren't always reasonable. The lesson here is a simple one – performance standards **MUST** be **SPECIFIC** and **CLEARLY COMMUNICATED**.
- What's your process for making important decisions? In order to work this out, you need to define which decisions are going to qualify as "important". It's also important to deal with the issue of what happens when you can't agree, because you'd be foolish to imagine you will always agree. Once the honeymoon period of team formation is over, some people may behave quite differently to what you expected...
- Communication – if it's going to be effective – might take a little bit more conscious effort than you expect. Think about which channels you will use for which types of message, what your expected response times are, and what times of the day or days of the week each of you might be unavailable. Make sure everybody else knows these things, and make sure you update everybody if any of your times change.
 - Something else that's really important is how you handle a situation where not everybody in the team shares the same first language. Maybe that means there are certain terms that either need explaining or being replaced by simpler terms with the same meaning. You might have to slow down your conversations a bit to allow for anybody who's working between two languages to process what's being said. There's one thing I've got to say here, which I think is really important and shouldn't need saying – but it does: People who don't have English as their first or only language are **IN NO WAY** less clever than first-language English speakers.
- Meetings – how often, when and where? These same questions apply whether you are talking about in-person or virtual meetings. One of the challenges of working in teams is getting even a couple of people together in the same place at the same time. Somebody's always got a reason why a particular time or place isn't convenient to them – and that means you've got to negotiate an acceptable compromise.
- Let's assume somebody does something that goes against your agreed standards – what will your disciplinary process look like? Notice I didn't say "Punishment" because discipline should never be confused with punishment. An important part of any disciplinary process – apart from how long any sanctions should remain in force for - *should* be the types of actions the rest of the team will take to *help* the member who's being disciplined to learn from whatever happened and to avoid doing that thing again,
- In your worst-case scenario, what's your process for exiting somebody from the team? Sometimes the last resort is necessary after you've tried everything else. Sure, you hope that *your* team will never get to this place, but you don't want to be inventing the process as you go – if it gets to that point, you are already investing a whole heap of emotional energy and time into things that are a distraction from the project. so you want to get this over as quickly and cleanly as possible. This is like buying insurance, where you pay the premiums up front in the hope you never have to make a claim later.

Once you have everything negotiated, get it documented while it's still fresh. Introduce any delay at this point and the danger is that what actually gets documented doesn't quite match what some people thought they agreed to. Make any necessary changes as soon as possible, then sign and date the document. That's an important part of the foundation to your whole project experience created.

Advice

- Living in a fantasy world where you don't need rules because everybody in the team agrees nicely about everything isn't reality. You are far better off having rules you don't need to go back to very often rather than having no rules and needing to sort out disagreements without them.
- Get your operating expectations and rules sorted as one of the first things you do. Trying to invent a rule that everybody can agree on when you're in the middle of a situation where you need to use them.
- Be as clear as possible when it comes to what acceptable performance will be like. The more specific you are up front, the less you've got to argue about later once the work starts. Words are not the only way to express acceptable standards. If you use visual demonstrations other than words, you need to make sure that everybody in the team understands them to mean exactly the same thing.
- When you are negotiating times and places for things like meetings, it's a good idea to share the inconvenience around rather than having one person who always has to sacrifice more than anybody else – if they can – to be there. Some people win, some people don't win so much, but the idea is you don't want anybody being frozen out because they have a particular commitment outside the team that they can't vary.
- Once you've signed and dated the rules, you've set a benchmark time where everybody in the team agreed how you were going to operate. If subsequent experience shows that a rule needs changing, there's nothing that says it can't be changed – you just need to go through the same negotiation process you used to create it in the first place.
- Go back to the rules frequently as a self-check that what you are doing matches what you agreed to.
- Don't rely on your Course Facilitator to sort your problems out for you *as a first option*. That doesn't mean that they won't help at all, but they will expect you to have tried first, and they will expect you to be able to explain and justify what you tried first. This isn't because they want to prove you wrong or make you look bad – it's because they want to avoid spending time repeating something that's already been tried and failed.
- If in doubt at any time – go back to the rules.

Team culture

At its simplest, you could define “team culture” as “The way things are done around here”

Whose responsibility is it to create the organisational culture within your project team? Simple: Yours. It’s time to stop thinking of yourselves as being “at school” now, where so much of what you thought and how you behaved seemed to be dictated by a rule book you’d never seen and enforced by a teacher whose thinking might not always have been clear to you. Putting those issues to one side, by now you should at least have learned how to behave in socially acceptable ways.

Now you’re in a situation where your Course Facilitator isn’t going to dictate thinking and behaviour in the same ways you may have been used to at school. Now, they will set out some overall expectations on the organisation’s part, but they are going to leave you to work out the operational details because you’re going to be doing most of your work away from where they can directly observe and intervene. Creating your own Standard Operating Procedures could be seen as an outward-facing expression of your team culture.

One statement I’ve always had some difficulty with is the one about treating people the way you would expect to be treated. Where’s the totally objective evidence that the way you want to be treated is in any way close to how other people want to be treated? I think it’s much more important to figure out how other people want to be treated and whether that’s something you are comfortable doing. What’s important, though, is to look beyond the face value of the words and ask the hard questions about what your team’s culture is really like:

- If the members of the current team haven’t worked together before, the traditions they bring to this new team and project might come from very different contexts. Are there some themes in common that can be incorporated into your current context? Are there some things that just aren’t going to fit what is needed now, and which need to be left out?
- Do you have any criteria in mind for rejecting potential members, or are you going to take more of a “*She’ll be right*” attitude, assuming that ones who wouldn’t “fit” will self-select out before you’ve confirmed the team’s final make-up?
- Do you have a vision or mission statement that captures what you are all about – something that could really exist independently of the project you are working on?
- Are you really as inclusive as you say you are? Do you treat everybody with an appropriate level of respect, even if they are visibly different to you, or think differently to the way you do? Are your values openly stated, or are you just assuming that everybody in the team has the same understanding of what they are and is in total agreement with them?
- Are you going to invest in your people, or is that something that only “employers” do? Are you just assuming that the team only needs to identify individual shortcomings and members will look after their own development needs?
- If you’re going to talk about being supportive, what does that really mean? Is it something that is directly and exclusively connected to “work” tasks, or does it go further than that? If it goes beyond “work” tasks, that doesn’t mean you have to be intimately connected 24/7 – you can still set boundaries that team members can go past **only by invitation**.
- What do “acceptable” work practices look and sound like? Are you all clearly agreed on the answer?
- Is there something in your expressed culture about having fun, or is that something you see as being completely separate to “work”? I’ve seen teams choose to answer this one both ways

– the ones that focus only on “work” have been more likely to end up either with an incredibly narrow focus, or to end up invoking their dispute resolution procedures because they lose the ability to agree even on quite minor things.

- How much time do you need to spend working in close physical proximity? Why? Do you have a favourite location for this, and why is that? If you decide you don’t need to spend a lot of time working in close physical proximity, how do you plan on monitoring and controlling task progress?

Advice

- One of the first things you need to do as part of forming your team is to talk about what’s important to each of you, and how you think those things can be achieved. The sooner you can clearly identify areas of similarity and difference, the quicker you can create something that has meaning for all of you, and that you will be comfortable signing up to.
- I know you’d love to form your team really quickly so you can get on with the main business of the project. A word of caution: Don’t let that be one of your main criteria for accepting anybody in the cohort that rocks on up and asks to join. Quick selections aren’t always good selections, so take the time to really get a “feel” for everybody you could end up working with. Ask the hard questions – although not in a rude or accusatory way – to find out as much as you can about them. If you’ve got all the answers and your gut call is still they aren’t the right person for you to work with over the duration of the project – trust your gut. I’m not saying that mine’s always been right, but it’s been right a lot more often than it’s been wrong.
- Don’t fall into the trap of thinking your team is too small and insignificant an entity to need either a vision or a mission statement. If you don’t know what you plan to be, or how you plan to be it, your chances of actually being it aren’t that great and you will be headed towards mediocrity rather than the stardom you *could* be capable of.
- Figure out what’s really important to you and write it down! No matter what happens next, those are the values you’re going to live by in everything you do for this project – or that’s what *should* happen. It’s important when you’re listing and defining your collective values that each of you says what you really think as opposed to what you think others expect to hear you saying.
- Investing in people is not something that only happens in a formal workplace relationship – it should happen as part of your project as well. Knowledge unshared won’t be as effective as knowledge shared. If somebody in the team needs knowledge that doesn’t exist to the necessary level in the team, help them look for an alternative source – maybe more than one person could benefit from this. Make opportunities for new knowledge to be used in practice – everybody in the team will benefit from this. Encourage members who are learning new skills; or upgrading their existing skills. People who know they aren’t alone are generally more motivated to learn and perform to a higher level, and that’s something all of you will benefit from.
- The ways in which you support each other – at a deep level - could be as unique as the people in the team and the relationships you create with each other. At a more fundamental level, they come down to some fairly common sense things like members not holding back with their knowledge and expertise to make themselves somehow more indispensable, helping a member who asks for it if they are having trouble working on a particular task, listening if somebody just needs to talk an issue through. What support is necessary is often going to be a judgment call, but it’s one that you need to make an open commitment that nobody’s going to hide from.

- Acceptable work practices mean setting *reasonable* expectations around things like quantity and quality of output, as well as deadlines and communication. You also need to decide how much flexibility your expectations are going to have attached to them. On the one hand, making them totally inflexible is simply setting yourselves up for inevitable conflict somewhere down the line when a target isn't achieved, even if the reason or reasons for it are justifiable. On the other hand, you don't want targets being so flexible that members start assuming there is no real imperative to meet them. The balance might be something that you end up changing as the project progresses and you get a better "feel" for what everybody in your team is capable of delivering. Making that change – if necessary – is better than staying stuck with something that's no longer fit-for-purpose.
- When you went to school, you were probably told that "work" was what you did on the boss's time, "fun" was what you did on your own time, and that the two were not compatible. Tell me this: Where's the compelling evidence that says you can't be as productive, if not more productive, by combining the two. You already know that you put more effort into something you're enjoying, and you'd rather be around people who make you feel good. Sure, there will be times where you need to be more serious and focused on project tasks rather than interpersonal relationships, but all work and no play make Little Johnny and Little Suzy very dull and unsatisfied people. Take the hint: It's OK to enjoy yourself while working. In fact, I'd go further and say it should be compulsory...
- Given the various online communication and collaboration tools now available, think about whether you are scheduling physical proximity meetings because you really need them, or because you only think you do. While I personally prefer physical proximity meetings, I'm also the first to agree that you don't need to have one just because it's on the schedule. You have one because it allows you to do something important more easily than by other means. The last thing you want is a culture where people start to hate meetings because they can't see a compelling purpose for them, especially if it's an inconvenience to attend them in the first place.



Something I always look for as an example of a successful team culture is how the members Play together. This is one of the four Fish! Principles associated with Pike Place Fish in Seattle.

For me, the question is simple: If you're going to spend a lot of time together as a team, why would you not want to enjoy yourselves as part of the experience?

Tolerance - being different isn't the same as being wrong

One of the really neat things about working in teams – although it can also be a tremendous “pain in the proverbial place” – is the way you are exposed to people who aren't the same as you. Older, younger, taller, shorter, darker, lighter, same gender identity, different gender identity... They might eat and drink different things to you, sound different, smell different, wear different fashion to you, speak different languages, think differently, behave differently... You get the point – they aren't a carbon copy of you.

If everybody was the same, the world would be a pretty boring place. – monochromatic sameness. Nobody would dare stand out from the crowd, because they would be worried about the rest of the team acting to bring them back into line with all the sameness. No new ideas. Not even any new ways of thinking about the same old ideas. If you always get together with people just like you, nothing spectacular is going to happen. Balanced against that, though, is the comfort that comes from not taking the risk of having to get to know and work with somebody who isn't just like you.

Working in a project team is an invitation to take a risk. An invitation to accept that being different isn't the same as being wrong. You might learn to do something better, or to do something you didn't think you were able to do before, by learning from these *different* people. Whether or not you know it, you could be a teacher for somebody else in your team just by being you.

In my experience, one of the biggest single sources of intolerance in project teams – especially of Li/MiTs, although it's certainly not limited to that particular context – is the difference between those members who are aiming to complete their project as close to perfection as they can get it, and those who will be happy just to have met the bare minimum standards. I've seen teams invest a lot of emotional energy and time in self-destruction because:

- The 99-percenters can't understand why anybody else doesn't want to achieve the same standards they do; and
- The 50-percenters can't understand (or sometimes don't really care) why anybody would want to do any more than is absolutely necessary to avoid having to repeat the course/project.

You're probably asking yourself why, if these people are so incompatible, they ended up part of the same project team. The answer is likely to be several variations on a theme:

- People made assumptions about what was said, and what wasn't said, based on their own previous experiences of prejudices (whether or not those prejudices have a reasonable foundation).
- People simply chose not to mention which of these two groups they thought they were part of, because they either didn't think it was important, or they thought voicing it out might see them having problems forming a team.

Everybody has their own reasons for being there and wanting to achieve what they want to achieve. Those reasons are different – not wrong. The only way you are going to understand what is important to each other, and why, is to have that brave conversation. Get those ideas out in the open. It's easy to say the low-score people better up their game if they want to stay in the team, or the high-score people better understand not everybody wants or needs to perform at their level. No way of *being* and working together is ever going to be found if you aren't prepared to have that conversation.

The reality is this: Nobody else is like you. If somebody does something you aren't comfortable with, or don't understand, tell them. Instead of getting aggressive and trying to punish them – because that just encourages them to do the same back at you – ask questions. Listen to genuinely understand what they say. Explain your point of view, and let the other person ask questions so they can understand you. A little tolerance goes a long way to reducing the amount of negative emotional energy and time that goes into attack-and-defence thinking where no other options are possible.

If you are willing to be tolerant of differences, instead of seeing them as examples of “wrongness”, you can grow from being transactional (focused on processes over people) to transformational (changing people so they use the processes more effectively). I'm not saying they don't exist, but I've never met or worked for any manager I've ever considered transformational. They don't tolerate differences because their primary focuses are task and compliance. Transformational leaders, on the other hand – and I have met and worked alongside some of these – encourage people to be the best possible version of themselves. They understand that differences in a team equal more learning and growth opportunities – all it takes is being tolerant enough not to try making everybody else carbon copies of some “ideal” team member. Transformationally-led teams, in my experience, routinely out-perform intolerant, transactionally-managed teams.

Advice

- Tolerance only comes from open eyes, open ears, and an open mind. Don't close people out before you know anything about them.
- Ask questions to discover the information you need to understand how and why other people are who they are.
- Listen genuinely to the answers – you will be surprised how much you learn.
- Genuinely invest the time in getting to know people as humans, rather than as potential problems you need to minimise.
- Be prepared to share who you are. Potential team-mates are more likely to display tolerance towards you if they can get a sense of who you really are, what is important to you, and why.
- Accept other people being who they are instead of trying to change them to be more like you.
- Be prepared to like people who are different to you.



Any one of the plants here would do well on their own. In tolerating each other's presence, they combine for a more spectacular display in much the same way as unique individuals come together to do spectacular things as a project team.

If you are up yourself or don't care about other people...

Your fellow cohort members probably don't have a problem with you talking them what you are confident at, and how good you are at doing it. They need that information to decide whether or not they can work comfortably in a team with you. Going beyond that, though, let's be blunt about two particular behaviours that aren't going to win you any friends:

Number One: Continually blowing your own trumpet about how good you are – usually at the expense of your fellow team members. You already established your competence as part of the entry criteria for getting into the team in the first place. Now your fellow team members care that you live up to what you claimed, get on with your work, and help develop their understanding and skills in your specialist area/s. You being good at something shouldn't come at the cost of trying to make your fellow Li/MiTs feel bad about themselves, because that's not actually going to improve your own performance. In fact, all it's going to do is come across as a mix between boasting and bullying – neither of which are constructive behaviours.

Number Two: Attacking the work and achievements of team members you don't think are performing to the same standard you are capable of. Chances are, most of the time, that they are working to the best of their ability. You attacking that ability isn't going to help them get any better at what they are doing. In fact, you're more likely to undermine their self-efficacy, leading to *worse* performance over time because they are more worried about when you next attack will come and what form it will take than they are about the quality or quantity of their own output.

Relating to both these issues: Before you *dare* blow your own trumpet or attack anybody else, take an **honest** look in the mirror. How perfect are you? Yes, you might be *really* good at something – maybe more than one something – but that doesn't give you the right to put anybody else down.

If you are the person on the receiving end of the bullying, that behaviour is unlikely to change if you don't say anything I've worked with bullies in the past who are so intimidating towards their fellow Li/MiTs that they refused to deal with the bully on their own. If you're ever in a situation like that, please reach out for help. You could look to others within your team-assuming there is anybody you trust enough to have them at your side. Remember that reaching out is not a competition to see if you have more 'friends' than the bully – it's about having somebody by your side who can help you work through the issues and reach an acceptable resolution.

Your Course Facilitator can also be a good source of help – it's part of what they are paid to help you navigate your way through as part of the collaborative project experience. If they can't help, they also have the ability to guide you towards more specialised advice if they think that might produce a better outcome for you.

Advice

- If you aren't prepared to bring a respectful and collaborative attitude to the table maybe you need to step aside from the experience before you get started.
- Never lose sight of the fact you weren't always as good as you are now at what you are good at now. Once upon a time you were a learner too, and you made mistakes. Those mistakes were the Learning Moments that helped you get better over time.
 - Allow your fellow Li/MiTs those same Learning Moments. Whether not they thank you directly for them, they are likely to appreciate your encouragement and support – if you offer it.

- If your own Learning Moments in the past have been more about punishment experiences (and you hated being made to feel incompetent and small), your present and future don't have to be "more of the same." You have the power **within the space of this project** to change your own reactions to something more positive. ***You don't have to be the person other people told you that you were in the past. You have the power and the necessary permission to be You V.2.0.***
- When it comes to changing your own behaviours in a positive way, there may be some valuable clues in the course materials. If there's not enough there, or you think you want something more `human`, reach out. Your Course Facilitator is always a good first person to reach out to because of their knowledge and diverse experiences. They may suggest other, more specialised help if they think that's likely to give you a better result. Whatever, they really are on your side (and not just because that's part of what they are paid to do).
- If you want to get more knowledge and have some more experiences in areas where you aren't so strong, your fellow Li/MiTs could very well be your coaches or mentors, but they are less likely to do this if you aren't treating them with respect in the first place.
- If you are the person on the receiving end of bullying behaviour: Speak up. You don't have to accept being bullied, because this sort of behaviour goes against anything that's in your team's Standard Operating Procedures. You didn't pay enrolment fees to have a bullying experience, and the sooner you make it clear that something is unacceptable, the sooner something can be done to deal with it.

Just be you – be authentic

As an amateur actor, I was once told by a director that I needed to be who the audience expected me to be, and that they would have worked this out within seconds of my appearance on stage – maybe even before I'd got my first line out. I had similar advice from one particular Head of School who expected me to dress a certain way because that matched the industry background *they* came from. They were not prepared to accept that I rejected the suit-and-tie (although I had both) approach and dressed in jeans and sweatshirt because that removed a visual barrier between me and the learners I was working with. The more barriers I could break down or remove, the better the relationship I could build with them, and the more likely they were to see me as an active fellow participant in their learning experience.

From these experiences I learned something invaluable: Be authentic - be the REAL you. Trying to be who you think somebody else expects you to be doesn't work, because your discomfort really stands out. People will react more positively when they have a sense they are dealing with who you really are as a person – somebody who cares about what they are doing. The energy that would otherwise have gone into creating an image for the rest of the world can now go into taking people on a genuine journey with you. Leadership is not about being perfect - it's about being authentic.

Advice

- As part of selling yourself as a fabulous person to be in a team with, you have probably done some reflecting on who you already are – because that's who you should have been selling. The authentic you is the one you know best. If you try selling an inauthentic you, trust me on this: It won't take long for the rest of the team to find out you aren't who you said you were.
- Being a carbon copy of anybody else simply doesn't work. Yes, there may be *some aspects* you want to adapt from other people because they are relevant to who you want to be and how you want to be that person – but I wouldn't advise trying to be a total copy because you will only ever be an imitation.
- Don't fall into the trap of using all the fancy words in the textbooks just because they are in there, especially if they aren't the language you normally use. If you aren't comfortable with the fancy words, there's a good chance that you won't use them correctly. Unless there are specific technical terms that you *must* use in the context of your project, use normal language that you are more comfortable with. Big words used wrongly, especially if it's repeatedly, aren't going to win you any friends.
- People – for the most part - will like you because of who you are, and you are *way more than* what you wear and how you speak. Be who you are and don't try to buy being liked – as soon as you can't afford to pay whatever the price is any more, people will discover they've been used.
- Don't pretend that you know more than you do. The gap between what you say and what you demonstrate will become obvious fairly quickly, and you could well find yourself being side-lined from important tasks or even exited from the team. Play to the strength of what you do know, as well as being willing to learn more.
- Discover the differences between what is expected of you in terms of things like dress and behaviour and what you feel most comfortable with. Adapt where that will give you better credibility with the people you need to work alongside and influence. Be *unashamedly you* where that isn't going to cause conflicts that could impact on project delivery.



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The author at his authentic best. Expensive-looking clothing will be worn when I judge it appropriate for the audience I'm working with. Aside from that, I'm more focused on doing what's necessary to deliver my contracted results - and most of those results have depended on technical competence and relationship-building skills rather than what I'm wearing to work.

Sometimes you just need a friend...

Strange as it may seem when you're working in a collaborative project, this has the potential to be one of the loneliest experiences you've ever had – if you let it. Humans are essentially social animals – most of us like to be liked; and being likeable is part of the price we have to pay to help make this happen. This is probably a bit more important when you start working with people you may not have met before; or might know very slightly but still not have worked with, because you have more of a relationship to create with them and the context is going to be more exclusively aligned with your current project – at least, at the start.

Some of the possible reasons you might want a friend include, but aren't necessarily limited to, the likes of:

- Somebody you can bounce your ideas off without feeling overly judged.
- Somebody who will understand when you are having a tough time with one or more aspects of the project – because they are part of the same team, working on the same project – and will offer to help you.
- Somebody who will be gently critical of your ideas, but without attacking you
- Somebody to stand up for you when somebody else is giving you a hard time.
- Somebody who comes from the same part of the world you do, who understands why you think the way you do, and who understands the whole range of general life issues you might be dealing with.
- Somebody you can talk with in your own language, if that's not the language in which the business of the team is conducted.

What do you like about other people, and why? What do you think other people like about you, and why? I'm just going to leave these questions sitting here for you to think about what your answers might be. They probably aren't questions that you will be able to answer in any detail instantly; nor should you.

Advice

- Treat your friendships with respect. They are created voluntarily, and nobody is obligated to stay on your friends list if you don't treat them with respect.
- Be consistent in your approach to friendship. The reality is that there are always going to be some people that you like more than others, and that's perfectly normal. Openly playing favourites is setting yourself up for problems by creating impressions for others that may not match your own thinking, and which you then have to invest time and emotional energy into trying to correct.
- Don't allow anybody to pressure you into being their friend, even if they are a part of your team and project. It's possible to maintain a professional working relationship with somebody without having to be a close friend with them in any context not directly connected with your team and your project.
- Above all – remain authentic to who you are and the values you have. Trying to be who you think other people want you to be when that's not who you really are is simply a waste of your valuable time and emotional energy. Be you – you are the best advertisement for you that there will ever be.

Welcome to the Drama Llama farm

Yes, I know – you’re an adult, so are all the people you could potentially work with. There’s nothing you can’t do, and nobody you can’t get on with for long enough to get it done. For some of you that may well be your experience. Others of you may get nowhere the end of your project without major stress. You may start to feel like you’re in the middle of that reality television comedy-drama, *The Apprentice*, where it seems there’s always a couple of Drama Llamas per season – people whose sole reason for existing is either creating dramas for others to experience; or being the self-proclaimed victims of somebody else’s dramas. If nothing else, it makes for drama that the advertisers love...

You’re about to tell me that you’re not on television, so there can’t be anybody like that here. I hope you’re right, although my experience tells me otherwise is likely to be the case.

Without doing a deep psych’ analysis, for some people, everything has to be a major drama – it’s as if they don’t have an existence if there’s no drama and they aren’t right in the middle of it. They do things behind other peoples’ backs. They make up stories about why things happened – stories that have only the barest smattering of facts in them, where the facts are conflated to mean things that simply aren’t true, and probably never were – because it suits whatever narrative they want to tell.

It's important for the Drama Llama to have friends – the more, the better. They will tell whatever stories necessary to achieve this aim, putting whatever slant on the story they think their audience are most likely to react favourably to, even if that means forgetting whatever story they told yesterday or last week or whenever... Only the current version of the story matters, and they will be paying very close attention to check how it’s being received, so a different spin can be applied as quickly as necessary.

In my experience, the most dangerous Drama Llama to deal with is the one who creates dramas behind your back, then either denies they are doing it, or refuses to engage with you directly to collaboratively address whatever issue or issues they think exist. They want somebody else to punish you because, for some reason they aren’t willing to do it themselves. I don’t know – maybe it’s because they want yet another person to blame for *their* performance as a way of covering up their own deficiencies. It’s like their life has this massive external locus of control in it, and the idea there might actually be an internal locus of control as well is perceived as some sort of weakness which they dare not expose.

For the Drama Llama, other people exist in two categories. You are either FOR them or AGAINST them. There is no DON’T KNOW option. Your decision which side you are on needs to be final and irrevocable. They will present you with the only evidence you are allowed to help you make your decision which side you are on, and they will tell you the only interpretation it is possible to put on that information. They will monitor you closely to make sure you aren’t receiving other information, applying a different interpretation to what you already have, and that your allegiance to them is not wavering in the slightest. In other words, while they are doing all this, there isn’t much attention being shown to your team’s project.

Being a Drama Llama is a full-time role. You’d better be ready for more than one drama on the go at the same time, because they don’t want to find themselves running out of attention-getting events. Nobody is immune from the Drama Llama’s attention. In fact, the more reasonably behaved you are, the more you can expect them to come for you because your being reasonable isn’t giving them the exclusive attention they crave.

If you think you're safe because all this Drama Llama stuff is happening to another team, I've got news for you and it's all bad. Drama Llamas know no boundaries – they expect support from outside their team as well. They will attempt to work their evil influence on everybody – in their mind, the more people hating you and not believing in your competence, the better. They may not even try to prove – with actual evidence – they are any better than you at doing anything. *It's enough for them to destroy you.* In the Drama Llama's world, there is only ever one winner, and it isn't going to be you!

Advice

- You don't have to put up with prolonged Drama Llama behaviour – nobody does. You have a set of Standard Operating Procedures – use them. Put your Drama Llama on notice that their behaviour isn't acceptable, make it clear exactly what's not right, and why.
- Work with your Drama Llama to craft a strategy to bring their behaviour in line with the Standard Operating Procedures. Make it clear exactly what a resolution will be like. While you'd probably like any change to be instantaneous, you'll have to settle for something that evolves over a period of time – but you need to make sure it's a finite period of time, or you'll never get a resolution.
- Review progress regularly so you can celebrate improvements and work collaboratively on any areas that still need to be addressed.
- If the Drama Llama refuses to engage with the process, or sufficient improvement doesn't happen in line with the strategy agreed, be strong, be brave, and invoke the ultimate sanction – exit the Drama Llama from your team. You aren't going to win any bonus points or any friends for carrying a Drama Llama and allowing that to negatively affect what you deliver as a project outcome.

S/EED – Someone/Everyone Else’s Dramas

Have you ever watched one of those soap operas on television or one of the streaming platforms? Every single one of them follows the same predictable pattern. You start with an interesting collection of people who all have something that connects them; some having more in common than others. Sub-groups begin to form where members have narrower, but more intense shared interests. As people get to know one another better, some will like each other more, while others like each other less. Some people will do well, while others won’t. There will be tensions not only within sub-groups, but also between sub-groups. There will be tensions between subgroups, whoever’s in charge of the whole environment, and with the world in general when things don’t go the way someone planned.

“Won’t bother me. I can get on with anybody and, anyway, I’m not here to get caught up in someone else’s dramas...” I’ve heard variations on this this said so many times over the years. I’ve never been quite sure if people are telling me what they think I expect to hear, or if they really believe they won’t be caught up in Someone/Everyone Else’s Dramas. Maybe they even have the best of intentions they will keep their interests totally focused on the work of the project and what it takes to be a great team member.

You know what happens when people are in a situation where they have to work together. They love each other, hate each other, ignore each other, amuse each other, tolerate each other, go looking for new friends... This is exciting stuff, because it’s happening in real time, and you just can’t help yourself – getting involved in Someone/Everyone Else’s Dramas is just so tempting because you’ve got an opinion on what is happening, and you just can’t wait to share it – whether other people are interested in it or not. Some people *might* be interested in your opinions – if they think having more people “on their side” means they are likely to win the argument they are in the middle of. Where life gets interesting is when the people on the other side of the argument want you to support *them*...

Isn’t it nice to be wanted? Both sides expect you to make a decision in their favour. This is a classic Win/Lose situation. Let’s assume you just want to keep the peace. How long will it be before both sides in the drama make it clear you can’t be friends with the other one? For these people, there is **no** middle option, and some of them have absolutely **no** intention of compromising – unless they get forced into it as a result of external intervention. When that happens, they have a new target to hate now – it’s whoever intervened to get the project back on track and the people at least treating each other with a modicum of professionalism. Notice I didn’t say “respect”, because some people just aren’t prepared to admit that whoever has annoyed them deserves that.

I know – this sounds like stuff right out of the primary school playground, right? Trust me - it's as real as it gets for some Drama Llamas...

Suddenly, your unsolicited opinion has taken you from an observer of something that might have only indirectly – at best – impacted on anything you are doing, to being right in the heart of the action, able to change the dynamic of so many other relationships. But wait – there’s more! You’ve also become *so* involved in Someone//Everyone Else’s Dramas that you aren’t focused on your own work anymore – and that’s going to cause some more dramas.

There’s a simple solution to this: Stay out of everybody else’s dramas. They don’t need you to be part of them – no matter how much they might think otherwise - and you won’t get any benefits from being involved. Focus on what you are really here for because that’s where all the rewards are to be had.

I've seen plenty of S/EED situations involving different types of mental cruelty – some deliberate, and some I believe to have been unintentional. Only twice have I seen things get to the point in front of me where I thought physical harm would be done. Both times I've stepped in the middle, risking my own safety - and I'm the first to admit I'm a bit of a wuss when it comes to physical conflict. Two reasons to momentarily forget I'm a wuss:

- As the Course Facilitator, I'm responsible for these people, both in the eyes of my manager and morally – and that means taking reasonable steps to protect them from physical harm as part of their work. I take that responsibility seriously
- The consequences of letting the harm happen far outweigh any potential benefits from such a Learning Moment.

I could give you chapter and verse on the topic of dispute resolution – how long have you got? In fact, I could write a whole new book on it... In the meantime, take what's in these briefings as an invitation to avoid heavyweight dispute resolution by working smarter in the first place rather than relying on dispute resolution as some sort of all-conquering “magic potion”.

Advice

- You may not be able to avoid being aware of Someone/Everyone Else's Dramas. Don't confuse awareness with an invitation to participate.
- Getting involved in something that doesn't concern you is likely to make the situation worse rather than better, so stay out of it.
- Treat people with genuine respect. That doesn't mean you can't disagree with them, but make sure you are challenging the ideas rather than attacking the person. Personal attacks benefit nobody.
- Know when to back down. She or he who has the most friends is not “the winner”. Collecting friends through drama is keeping a score that doesn't matter in the overall scheme of things.
- You have a team to be part of, and a project for which you have negotiated deliverables. Make those your focus.



If in doubt – keep your snout out!

When you aren't enough (in your own mind)

Some of you may have come to both your team and your project unsure if you could “measure up”, especially once the Course Facilitator briefed you on what was going to be required from you. That's quite natural because this experience is probably quite unlike anything you've done before. Some of you may develop an uncertainty as the project progresses, and this may be linked with feedback from your Course Facilitator, your fellow Li/MiTs, your Project Sponsor, or some combination of these. That's also quite natural, even if you were pretty confident going into the thing at the start.

This project, and this team, are learning experiences for you. No matter what you've done before, nobody is expecting you to be perfect now – except, maybe, you.

If you're expecting some sort of deep and meaningful counselling here, I'm probably not the source you're looking for. Half my undergraduate degree is in psychology, which means I know enough to know there's a lot I don't know. I've got a lot of practical experience of facilitating projects and teams, and that's probably taught me at least as much as my formal study of what make people tick. As a Course Facilitator, I've deliberately *not* given myself the ability to issue binding directives about how people behave or projects are run – outside the overall course parameters – because the danger is that teaches people to depend on me rather than working to solve problems and implement decisions for themselves. Think of your Course Facilitator as a resource rather than as a saviour.

Maybe you've had one or more bad experiences in the past that have caused you to doubt how good you really are. Maybe those experiences come from contexts that are completely different from what you're doing now, and you've somehow connected them in your own mind.

Remember there's a difference between a judgement of “good”, meaning competence in the context of teamwork and the project, and “good” meaning you being a really neat human being. There are bound to be some work tasks you are more comfortable with/better at than others – that's life. Just because you aren't so hot at doing something doesn't mean you aren't still an awesome person – there's no automatic link between those two things.

Remember also that those judgements often come without evidence you can assess or challenge. Just because somebody else said something about you or your ability doesn't necessarily make it *objectively true*. They're looking at you from *their* perspective rather than *yours*. One of the most important things you can bring to a collaborative project is a willingness to learn, to try new things, or the same things different ways. In my experience, learning willingness outranks perfection any day of the week – and it's a lot easier to achieve.

If somebody else insists on judging you harshly, ask for specifics about what they aren't happy with. Assuming you need to make any changes, you can't even begin that process until you know what the gap is between actual and desired performance – and how “real” that gap is. What they tell you is also going to give you some valuable clues about what's important to them, and those clues can be a big help in deciding which changes to make and how to make them.

There may be times when it feels like everything is getting a bit much to deal with. This might be related directly to the team or the project you're working on, or it might be something completely unrelated, but which is somehow affecting your work on the project. Seriously, you don't know which problem – or even part of a problem – to start trying to solve and the longer you leave making a start,

the bigger the problem gets. It's tempting to do nothing in the hope that the problem will eventually sort itself out – even though you know that's unlikely to happen. Is there an alternative?

Yes, there is: talk to somebody about what is happening and how you feel about it. The reality is that there's still a big stigma attached to "talking to somebody", because some people may perceive it as a sign of weakness. The reality, in my experience is the exact opposite. The people who are brave enough to start the conversation have a significant advantage when it comes to identifying the root causes of a problem and the potential solutions they can work on. Your Course Facilitator is a good person to approach, because they generally have a lot of experience working with diverse people in pressure situations. They may not be able to help you solve a problem directly, but there's a pretty good chance they can point you in the direction of somebody else who can help.

If you aren't comfortable talking with them, your institution may provide access to counselling services, and these are often free of charge to you. If there's somebody you already know outside of the organisational setting that you feel comfortable talking with, they might be your best bet. Where they come from matters a lot less than how comfortable you feel with them.

One suggestion I would definitely make here is to be as clear as you can in your own mind before starting the conversation about what you want the other person to do as an outcome of the conversation.

- Do you just want somebody to listen with minimal interruption while you sound off about what's happening for you? This could be a good option for you if you think best out loud – chances are you might be able to talk yourself in the direction of a viable solution by doing this because you've got an audience that you need to organise your thoughts for.
- Do you want somebody who will ask questions to help guide you to some options you might not have thought about before, even though you had most of the information necessary to make the discoveries? This could be a valuable option providing you are willing to accept that the questions aren't intended solely to expose what you don't know for bad purposes.
- Do you want somebody who is largely going to agree with you that any problem is the other person's fault rather than yours? There are a couple of problems with this approach. The first is the perception of "fault", which implies actions that are in some way knowingly wrong and deliberately uncorrected. The second is that this "taking sides" is not helpful when it comes to working out actual causes and solutions.
- Do you want somebody who will make the decision about what to do for you? You might see this as the easy way out – especially if you think they are more experienced than you, but there are still some drawbacks with this approach. Firstly, they may not feel comfortable making binding decisions for people and projects that don't directly affect them. Secondly, you need to think seriously about what it means to give somebody outside your team that much power over you – especially if you don't agree with what they decide.

Advice

- **Believe in you.** You are good enough to have come this far on your journey, whether you think of it in academic, professional or personal terms. You aren't here by accident – you're here because you've earned the right to be here.
- Accept that you aren't perfect, you don't know everything, and there will be times when you don't do things in the best possible way. These are Learning Moments, just the same as everyone else in your project team will have from time to time. Take the opportunity to reflect on whatever has happened; and learn how to do that thing differently next time.

- Accept there will be times when you get feedback that you either weren't expecting, don't understand, or that you don't think is reasonable. You can sit back and worry about what it *really* means, moan about it to anybody that will listen – apart from the person it came from; or challenge it. I would go for the third option – it might take a little more bravery than the first two, but it's the only one likely to get you the detail you need to move forward.
 - When I say “challenge”, I mean to do it respectfully. There's a difference between being firm in keeping at something until you get the information you need and being aggressive. If you come across as aggressive – unwilling to really consider any points of view apart from your own – that's just going to cause the person on the receiving end of your aggression to not want to be reasonable in return.
- No matter how good you think you are at the start of the project, I know you are better than that. It makes no difference whether I have known you before, or you are new to me – I just know this. Don't ask me how much better you are than you think because I don't know that - yet. The answer will only be revealed by living through the experience that is about to come.
- Sometimes, believing in yourself might not be enough. That's perfectly normal. The best advice I can offer here is talk with somebody about how you are feeling, and why. Make sure it's somebody you feel comfortable with. You need to know they will treat whatever you tell them with appropriate confidence.
 - Be clear about what you expect from anybody you have that conversation with. Setting clear expectations and boundaries helps you both get the most out of the conversation.
- **Believe in you – you're worth it.**



*You **ARE** enough.*

*You **ARE** awesome.*

Don't let anybody else convince you otherwise.

Remember (and value) your journey

Life is a journey, and very few of us have absolute certainty about many of the stops along the way.

I've always maintained that collaborative Project-Based Learning is the most fun you can have without taking any clothes off or doing anything you don't want your mother finding out about. The catch is that it's not until right at the end when you're looking back on all the things you've achieved that you are likely to discover this. Maybe you won't even discover it then – it might need more time for the **real** lessons – not just the academic ones - to sink in.

To reach the end, you'll have had experiences that didn't exactly match the plan (where you *had* a plan for them). Some of the results will have been worse than you expected, while others will have turned out better than expected at the start. Some team members won't have turned out to be what you expected, in both bad and good ways. You may have under-delivered or over-delivered on your contracted deliverables.

Most importantly, though, you won't be the same person you were at the start of the journey. You will probably still look the same on the outside. The changes will be mostly on the inside, and it will take your own reflection to start to appreciate this

Depending on how your course has been structured, there are likely to be one or more opportunities for reflection. These will probably take two forms:

- Autoethnographic – telling your own story. You are the only person who can tell your story from this perspective because you are the only person who knows for sure what was going through your mind at the time of the events you are describing. How do you evaluate your own performance? How do you think it was influenced by the way in which your fellow team members behaved, and why do you think this was? What would you not change about the way you worked, and why? What would you change for the future, and why? There are **no** absolutely “right” or “wrong” answers to your reflections – they simply are what they are; a foundation for you to base your future thinking and behaviour on. It's a really good idea to keep a copy of what you have to say so that you can go back to it later as a way of measuring your own development as an individual and as a team member.
- Ethnographic – telling the story of how your fellow Li/MiTs performed during the project (usually seen through your own eyes since very few teams, in my experience, turn this into a truly collaborative exercise). How do you think they performed against the same criteria you measured yourself against, and why do you think that was? What things do you think they should do the same way in the future, and why? What things would you recommend they do differently in the future, and why?

With both stories, there's inevitably going to be some bias built into how you tell them. That's OK, providing you openly acknowledge how it could have affected your view of people and events. The point of the exercise isn't to write Shakespeare-perfect prose, but to write something that's true to who you are and to your lived experiences. It's not about writing words that you think other people would like to read if those aren't the words that will tell the story as you want to tell it

You may end up with some quite unexpected outcomes as a result of your journey (actual outcomes, as they say in all the best advertising, may vary from those stated here):

- You may develop deep friendships with people you might not have met; or might not have appreciated in the same way if not for your collaborative project experience.
- You might discover that a friendship you thought was unbreakable wasn't – at least, in the context of this particular collaborative project. Maybe the break actually goes beyond this context – that's something you will need to work out for yourselves if it comes to that.
- There might be something you discover you are way better at doing than you ever thought you would be. The flip side of this is that you might discover there's something you don't like as much as you thought you would have now you've had a taste of doing it "for real."

For some of you, the collaborative project journey might not be something that stretches you that far out of where you thought your comfort zone already was. At the other extreme, some of you might feel like you've been to hell and back, to use a common saying. The majority of you will probably be somewhere between those two extremes. One thing's for sure – it's unlikely to be a journey that you'll forget in a hurry.

Advice

- Every event that has happened to you as part of the project, whether it happened to you alone, or to you in collaboration with others, has contributed to the person you are by the time you reach project's end.
 - Your natural inclination might be to focus only on the positive things, because those are the ones you obviously want to keep on doing again in the future. There's nothing wrong with a positive focus – **providing you understand why the things that turned out well did so**. Dig deeper than the surface of your results and look for the causes. Some of those will be things you had a reasonable level of proactive control over, while others may be things where you had to choose the most appropriate ways of reacting. The real value lies in understanding the reasons why you made the choices you did.
 - For some of you, the natural tendency might be to focus more on the negatives – the things that didn't go according to your original plan and intentions. There's nothing wrong with a negative focus – **providing you treat them as Learning Moments rather than as opportunities to mentally "beat yourself up."** Again, dig below the surface.
- Even if your team doesn't have a collaborative process for discussing everybody's reflections, there's nothing to stop you informally bouncing some of your thoughts – maybe all of them – off others in the team. Having multiple viewpoints focused on the same events gives you a greater depth of information to work with.
- I've had colleagues in the past tell me that collaborative reflection is like a form of cheating. Reasons advanced for this include the potential for conveniently overlooking negative events or creating positive events that either didn't happen as described; or didn't happen at all, just to make everybody look better. My experience with the teams that have done this in a formal way is that these things don't happen; that objectivity tends to moderate any extreme views and, at the same time, create a greater focus on potential Learning Moments. Of course, doing it at all connects directly with your team culture and how willing people are to trust in the objectivity of the process. If you have a good team culture, it's definitely something I would recommend doing.
- Don't do what so many Li/MiTs have openly told me they are going to do in the past – that is, leave starting your formal reflection until the day before you have to submit it. Yes, I know it's tempting because the Project Report and all the associated bits and pieces that go with it are worth way more marks towards your overall result, and you naturally want to focus on where you're going to earn the biggest rewards. There's a couple of arguments against this strategy:

- Your Course Facilitator is pretty good at spotting things that have been done the night before they were due. Don't expect to get big rewards for this – unless you're a believer in unjustified miracles.
- The person who loses out the most from this strategy is *you*. Missing out the opportunity to take a critical look at your own performance so you have a stronger foundation to build on for the future simply means that foundation won't be as strong as it could be. You may not notice the effect of this for some time – indeed, some people may never appreciate just what they've missed at this time.
- Treat the exercise with the respect it deserves. The deeper and more honest your reflection, the more value you are able to receive from your journey.



You could think of your journey as similar to walking along this bush path. All around you are interesting things to pay attention to, even if they aren't directly relevant to why you are journeying in the first place. Some you will pass on by, others you will stop and pay attention to.

There are places of relative darkness, places of gentle light, and places of almost blinding light. The path twists and turns, rises and falls sometimes gently and sometimes more sharply. Each turn reveals new sights – perhaps more of the same, and sometimes something completely unexpected. Sometimes it is wide enough for several people to walk abreast; at other times it may be so narrow that your team must progress single-file.

When you look back at how far you have come, you may not even be able to see the start of your journey any more. As you take the time to reflect, several things become clear to you:

- *Believing you could not travel this path successfully – for whatever reason – once upon a time - is now demonstrably untrue.*
- *You now have more knowledge and experience that equip you to be a more adventurous traveller next time.*
- *You have learned more about what it really means to be you, the place you have in the world, and the value you can offer to others as part of future collaborations.*
- *You enjoyed yourself, because learning you could make fun was learning that got done.*
- *Maybe you learned what sorts of journeys you don't want to go on in the future. This rejective knowledge is every bit as valuable as all the acceptive knowledge you developed.*

Section C: Making your project and your team “work”

In which I talk about the importance of creating and working the plan...

Just because it hasn't been done before – and you are *only* Li/MiTs...

“No, we can't do that. Nobody else is doing that and, if it was a good idea all our competitors would already be doing it...” If you don't hear those words spoken out loud, there's a pretty good chance somebody in the team's going to be thinking them quietly – maybe that person will be you. That thinking is getting trapped in somebody else's reality that they created to try to explain a different set of circumstances.

All the way through your compulsory schooling, you've had not just your behaviour, but also your thinking guided by rules. You may not even have been aware of some of the rules until you broke one and then suffered the consequences of that. You learned what other people thought and about the thinking models they might have used. You learned to follow predictable paths to predictable outcomes, justified in predictable ways. Now, with this project, you find yourself in a space where you have both the permission and an expectation to use what you have learned as a foundation rather than as a fence that you have to operate inside at all times.

Just because something hasn't been done before doesn't mean it can't be done. As a leader, an important part of your role is to let your mind fly into the spaces where nobody has been before. To be adventurous enough to explore what is possible. To lift your people on the journey with you, so they are also thinking about what might be possible. To encourage and celebrate diversity of thinking rather than attempting to restrict it.

Let's assume you indulge in a little `wild thinking` and come up with one or more potential solutions to your project problem. You can't find any evidence of anybody else trying something similar. You're on a potential `winner` here. Here's where another problem can creep in – poor self-efficacy. In other words, you – individually, severally, or collectively – don't believe you are good enough to come up with a plan guaranteed to make your idea work. You are convinced that nobody – especially your Project Sponsor – is going to take you seriously because you are *only* Li/MiTs.

You are – for the most part – young, and you don't have the same level of life or organisational experience as those who will be sitting in judgement on your work. That's your advantage! You haven't spent as long being exposed to all those messages about the things you can't do, so you have so much less to *unlearn* when it comes to being ready for exploring what *might* be possible. Proving your problem solutions are different will be easy for others. Being different does **not** mean you are wrong, and the only way for somebody to prove you weren't 100% `right` is to implement your solutions and see what results they get. Rather than accepting a label putting you down applied by somebody else, issue the challenge for them to come up with something better if they don't like what you came up with. You don't have to be second to anybody.

I would put two notes of caution here. Firstly, whatever you are proposing, or are doing, has to be legal. Breaking the law has no place in your project. It's also something that the people above you may not be able to protect you from the consequences of if you decide to do it. Secondly, your research has to be aligned with best practice when it comes to ethics. If you are not getting your data – particularly, but not just limited to, your primary data by ethical means, at the very least you are risking your research being rejected as invalid – in other words, everything you have done is effectively `being thrown in the bin`. At the worst, you've created a reputational – and possibly legal – issue for the organisations supporting your project.

Advice

- Work on the basis that you don't know all the answers, and neither do your Project Sponsor or Project Facilitator. Your project is intended to discover at least some of the possible answers.
- Just because problems have been solved certain ways, or opportunities taken advantage of in certain ways in the past, doesn't necessarily mean those are the only ways to do things.
- `Wild thinking` is permissible. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it's compulsory. Your wildest idea might not be the one you end up recommending as your eventual solution, but it's a necessary part of finding what that solution is.
- Believe in yourselves as much as you believe in the solution you are recommending. Believing that others are going to reject your solution before they even know what it is; or have had a chance to think about how you've justified it, is finding a problem that doesn't exist.
 - Think about this: If the people you are worried about rejecting your idea already knew what the answer was, your project would not exist. They **don't** already know the answer, and there is **absolutely no reason** why your recommended solution can't be the best answer to their problem. You've done the research and thinking they haven't – that makes **you** the experts here.
- *Only* being a Li/MiT is *only* a label. You don't have to wear that label for yourself or anybody else, because you are so much more than that. You are a thinker of thoughts that haven't been thought before, and solver of problems in ways that haven't been tried yet. You are valuable as individuals. You are valuable as part of a team.
- Don't go breaking the law. There's no excuse for it, and if anybody tells you to do something (especially if they are a person in authority as far as the project is concerned), DO NOT DO IT.
 - If you do go breaking the law, don't expect protection, especially if you did it knowingly.
- Make sure that what you are doing fits with all ethical guidelines for best practice research. While your Project Facilitator will make sure you are informed about best practice, as well as any specific organisational requirements, it is your responsibility to make sure that you are familiar with what they mean in practice, and that you are following them.



Dream it – see it – do it – be it. Now is your time to fly into uncharted spaces simply because you can...

Assumptions (The mother of many problems)

There are many different variations on the theme of this heading – some more polite than others; some amusing and others damning. What I think is one of the most accurate is this one: “When you assume, you make an ass out of u and me”. In other words, deciding when you don’t have all the necessary information isn’t likely to lead to a good outcome. If that’s the case – and it sounds like common sense that it might be – why do we keep on making assumptions? There are some fairly common reasons that lie behind most assumptions, and often they aren’t questioned until something goes wrong.

It’s highly likely you don’t want to come across as not knowing something. You’ve either been taught, or somehow believe, that other people will react more positively to you if you come across as knowing what you are doing. Whether or not it happens consciously, that means you overestimate the possibility of finding more information that confirms what you believe. The trap here is that you believe what you know from *past* experience – even if the circumstances *now* are demonstrably different – will fit these new circumstances. If you are usually “right” more often than you are “wrong”, this will simply be repeating a proven strategy – saving you time by not questioning things that don’t need it. All you need to do is to convince everybody else in the team you are right – job done.

You underestimate the consequences of any of your assumptions being proven wrong. There might be several reasons behind this. For a start, you might be super-convinced that you are right. The alternative – that you are wrong – is just not possible. Conversation over. In the unlikely event that you are proven wrong, your fellow team members will understand this is just bad luck, or that somebody else is just trying to make you look bad, and those things don’t justify you being disciplined or exited from the team. Even your Project Sponsor will understand and not be upset that your team might have taken the project in a non-productive direction...

If you don’t ask questions, that means there’s a real risk of you being guided by other peoples’ assumptions – because you don’t know how much of what they are telling you is based on assumptions and how much might have some actual evidence supporting it. You’ve assumed that the way *you* understand things and make decisions is the same way other people do. Especially in the case of a newly formed project team, you don’t have the evidence *yet* to support this assumption. Questions don’t automatically mean that you are against somebody.

You’ve confused the need for speed in decision-making with the need for being right. Sometimes there *will* be a *genuine* need for quick decisions, and you *may* have to do this based on assumptions. If that’s the case, make sure you are prepared to defend them later when the time comes for reflecting back on what you did. The defence can actually lead to some of your best learning. On the one hand, you develop a better understanding of why something worked, and that means you are able to make better decisions in similar circumstances in the future. On the other hand, learning why something didn’t work can lead you towards making more effective decisions in the future, which is still a ‘win’ for you and the team.

Advice

- If you are making an assumption about something – say so; and say what you are basing it on. That makes it so much easier for everybody else in the team to understand your thinking and get behind it; or challenge it if they think that’s necessary.

- If you're going to question an assumption, make sure it's the assumption you are challenging and not the person you are attacking.
- There's a difference between a challenge and an attack. Do the former with respect and it facilitates learning and growth – everybody wins. Do the latter and it can lead to destruction – everybody loses.
- Whatever you do, **own it**. That might feel a bit tough sometimes, but it's going to help you be a lot more effective as a team member and earn you a lot more respect and credibility within your team.



A well-formed and well-trodden track. We assume others have been here before us – a reasonable assumption (we think) based on the evidence immediately in front of us. That must mean we are on a/the “right track.” Will this assumption help us decide whether to turn left or right ahead? What assumptions are we making, based on what we cannot see and cannot know yet, about why this track and its two forks could be the best route for us, and how have we justified them to ourselves? How can we explore both directions with the time and other resources we have available and still reach our destination on time? Have we been seduced by our initial reaction to this side track when we should have stayed on the main track? Assumptions may help us make quick decisions, but they should never blind us to the questions we should be asking and attempting to answer before acting on them.

The project choice itself

You may be in a situation where you have a degree of choice, or maybe even total choice, over the project you are going to work on. If you get the project given to you without choice, that might mean you don't take quite so much away from this conversation, although you might still have your thinking sparked about how you can modify a project that doesn't seem (at first glance) to have any scope for adjustment in it.

The project is something that's going to occupy you for weeks or months, so it's important that it's something you think you can be interested in for as long as it takes to get it done. There's nothing worse than being "stuck" working on a project where you just don't "feel" it, because you've got nowhere else to go. Once you are locked into a contract between your team, your institution, and the Project Sponsor and their organisation, there's usually no scope to jump to another project because you've changed your mind about this one.

Sponsors of potential projects believe in the projects they are pitching – at least, you hope they do. The reason for making this point is that they might have excellent project knowledge, but not be superstar presenters. That's why you need to pay close attention to the *content* of what they are saying, and not making judgements based solely on *how* they are saying it. Make notes about the points that really stand out for you. These can be compared between team members because it's unlikely that all the same points will have equal importance to all the members for the same reasons.

The only `dumb` question is the one you don't ask because you're worried about looking `dumb` in front of others. The reality is that the Project Sponsors are unlikely to tell you everything you want to know during their presentation. They will tell you what they *think* you need to know, but they can't anticipate every need for every person in the audience. The only way you're going to get more information is by asking questions. Some of those might be during a dedicated time at the end of their presentation; some of them might have to come outside of that forum.

When you are contacting Project Sponsors outside their presentation, remember that they are busy people and the project they just pitched is only one of a number of things they've got going on at the same time. That means their replies to your questions might take a little while – they aren't just sitting there waiting for you to call or email. They might also be dealing with other individuals from your cohort, or even fully-formed project teams. Maybe a good way for *you* to manage the demands on *their* time before final decisions are made is to see who else in the cohort wants to ask the same (or similar) questions. Then they can be asked collaboratively and *one* answer provided, which is then distributed back amongst people who wanted the answer, rather than the Project Sponsor having to answer the same (or similar) questions multiple times.

The longer you sit back and wait before starting to ask questions, the greater the chance you miss out on a project you were interested in because somebody else was asking questions before you. How quickly you ask questions sends a powerful signal to Project Sponsors about who might be interested enough, and capable enough, to take their project on. I'm not saying that means the people who ask the *quickest* questions are necessarily asking the *best/most relevant* questions, but that's the reality of perception that you are dealing with.

Something that's worth remembering is that there may be some information that Project Sponsors aren't going to release, either in an open forum, or even to the project team/s they might end up working with. It depends on what they consider as being sensitive, either commercially or for other

reasons. That's something that might limit what you will be able to achieve with a project, and it's something you're just going to have to learn to live with.

Do you want a project that's well within your comfort zone, or are you looking for something that's going to "stretch" you? Each of these options has its own advantages and disadvantages - you really need to think about which ones are most relevant and important to you. Your choice is also going to be important to your team-mates, and I've seen two things cause misunderstandings within teams more than just about everything else put together: people who want to cruise while others want to stretch, and vice versa. Asking questions won't eliminate these misunderstandings completely, but it will make them much less likely.

Advice

- Make notes when the potential projects are being presented. This saves you having to rely on memory (unless something speaks so loudly that you make an instant decision).
- Unless you're part of a team where everybody happens to agree on the same project choice (even if it's for different reasons), you need to take an active part in the discussions in order to make sure that your voice is heard. Nobody is going to read your mind otherwise.
- **Ask questions – plenty of them – rather than making assumptions that might later turn out to be wrong.**
- Think about how you're going to word those questions to make sure that what you're getting back is what you were looking for.
- Make sure you record the answers for the questions and store them somewhere you will remember.
- Argue for what you want – but make them reasoned arguments that promote ideas rather than attacking personalities.
- Know when to compromise – that's an important skill you're going to need all the way through the project. That's not the same as just giving up because you can't be bothered debating an issue any more.
- Whatever project you choose is something you need to be comfortable with for the duration, so think carefully before you make a final decision.

So – you think your project is unnecessarily hard...?

I know – one of the standard “complaints” in the early stages of any collaborative project course is about why you can’t just take answers “off the shelf” and present those to your Project Sponsor as the answer to whatever problem they set you to solve for them. Where is the value in you having to come up with a bespoke solution to what might look like a fairly standard problem that’s been solved many times before? There are a few points you need to understand about why the project is the way it is:

- There’s a Course Descriptor lying behind everything that says you have to create a bespoke solution – you just don’t get to contract out of that, so stop your moaning and just accept it is what it is. Invest that moan time in your team and your project.
- If an “off the shelf” solution was all that was required, that wouldn’t represent an appropriate degree of challenge, or require an appropriate degree of academic rigour in your justification and reporting at this level. You are now operating at the level where you are expected to be able to identify problems and their scope, investigate potential solutions, propose and justify the most appropriate for the circumstances of your problem and, where necessary, implement at least part of your solution to demonstrate its appropriateness. This is a job of work you are doing now – not writing another “school assignment.”
- If the solution was really that easy, the Project Sponsor wouldn’t need your team because they would already have implemented the solution for themselves – which they clearly haven’t... These people are depending on you to do what they haven’t been able to. If you can, if they adopt what you propose at the end of the project and run with it, that’s a fabulous entry you get on your CV because that’s as real as it gets, and that’s way more valuable for your future than getting high marks writing *theoretical* assignments.
- You’ve already come through a number of other courses that should have equipped you with the knowledge and skills necessary for this collaborative project. These may not have been positioned as preparing you for this, or you might not have considered that to be as important then as it is now. Hopefully you kept all the course materials and any notes you took – going back to them now, and right through the whole project, is a great way to extract extra value from them.
- Everything you’ve ever discovered about life and how the world works outside the formal “classroom” learning environment is another useful foundation for making your team operate; and could also be useful for your project as well. The basics of effective teamwork are pretty much the same regardless of the context in which the team is operating.
- The more you have conversations among yourselves about how hard project work and teamwork are – the more these things will become true, because there may not be anybody in the team who dares to disagree openly with the moaning and general sense of how this is all too hard.
- One thing that can lead to a feeling of “too hard-ness” is if you don’t believe the Project Sponsor is willing to take you seriously and implement any of your final recommendations. Even I would be reluctant to give a project everything I had if I believed this was likely to be the case. Instead of just convincing yourselves this is true, why don’t you have a brave conversation to find out what limits the Project Sponsor *might* be putting on implementing anything you come up with? You might be surprised at what they are prepared to do if you put up a good enough case for it, but you’ll never know if you don’t ask...

I'll share an example with you that demonstrates some of what I'm talking about:

- Team of three – 600 hours between them to invest in a project that involved revamping the branding of a retail business selling Italian ceramic tiles. They spent most of the trimester alternately moaning about how difficult the project was, and how the team couldn't agree on anything; and then ignoring all the advice they were given on how to work and manage their project more effectively. Following their project presentation, which boiled down to purchasing a new flag for the flagpole outside the store and getting some pens printed for giveaways to potential customers - their Course Facilitator pointed out that he could probably have achieved the same outcome in 30 minutes with a phone and phone book – and then speculated as to what they might have spent the other 599 and a half hours working on. Overall, they didn't score very good marks because they didn't have much evidence of any work to put forward. What changed as a result of their project? Short answer: Nothing. Two years later and I was driving past that business ten times a week going to and from work. The tattered remnants of the old flag got steadily smaller, but no new flag ever appeared. An experience as a potential customer didn't score me a free pen either. I always wondered whether they knew in advance that none of their recommendations would be implemented even though the father of one of the team members owned the business, or if they were simply doing the bare minimum to pass the course so they could graduate.

Advice

- Your project is only hard if you want to make it that way – but it doesn't have to be that way. You already have tools, knowledge and experiences that are your foundation for working smarter rather than harder. It's your choice whether you use them, and the degree to which you do it.
- Hoping somebody else is going to do the hard work for you, or even that they won't require any being done isn't an option, so cross that off your list right now.
- **The more you do, the more you learn.** One of the most important outcomes of the course is to improve your employability and demonstrating that you can do more than simply copy other peoples' solutions to *similar* problems is one of the best ways I know to do that. Contrary to what you might think, none of the key stakeholders in your project are looking to prove you wrong in your thinking. It's in all their best interests for you to come up with something that's likely to work, so when you think they are being unnecessarily hard on you, or that they just don't understand you, it's because they are guiding you in their own ways to be the best you can be and do the best you can do.



If you can't create a project where most of the answer is composed of "off the shelf" solutions, your next choice might be to create something that's really elegant and shows off just how good you are at problem solving and opportunity taking. The reality is that the world in which your project and your team exist is not one made up of black and white answers – things are rarely simply "right" or "wrong." You operate in a world where the answers are often found in the shadows – the grey areas between the two extremes. The challenge for you is coming to appreciate elegance isn't one extreme or the other, but the combination of many different shades to get just the effect you want.

Contract purpose and how much to aim at delivering

If you aren't used to working in a contractual environment – which many of you may not be outside the context of your collaborative project – it's important to understand the purpose of the Project Contract. Boiled down to its simplest, it does two things. Thing One – what you are going to do, and what performance objectives are attached to this. Thing Two – how you plan to go about it.

Chances are that you may have a template that you are required to work with, so that takes away some of the freedom you have to be innovative. Most Course Facilitators, in my experience, will allow you to go beyond this if you can demonstrate that any proposed changes are in the best interests of the stakeholders and the project. Regardless of whether you are proposing any changes or working with a stock template, it's your responsibility to make sure you *all* – not just some of you – understand what each of the sections requires. No matter what specialisations you have within your project team, each of you will be held accountable for achieving what the contract specifies *in its totality*.

A word of caution here if you don't have a template to start with: A lot of the templates that will come up on the first few pages of a rudimentary Google search are designed for Information Technology projects. That's fine if you are working on an IT-type project. If yours doesn't have that type of focus, there may be some parts of the template that are simply not relevant for what you are working on. Don't try to make sections “fit” your project if they clearly lack relevance – this will simply involve you in doing a lot of extra work that will have little or no benefit to any stakeholders. Where this is the case, it's better to spend the time looking for a template that better matches your project in the first place.

One of the most common questions I'm asked is how much a team should promise in their contract. Since the “correct” answer – if there is such a thing – is as unique as each project and the team working on it, it's easier to lay out a couple of general scenarios for you so that you have a foundation for making choices that are most appropriate for you.

Choice One: Low Delivery. This is not the same as under delivery, which I will talk about in a minute. What I'm talking about here is where a team sets delivery goals that are less than what they should be reasonably capable of delivering, given their own knowledge, skills and abilities, and the environmental circumstances surrounding the project. In other words, and for whatever reasons, you are taking the easy way out by doing no more work than is necessary to satisfy the minimum academic requirements for the project. While your Course Facilitator might be disappointed by this approach, it's within the letter of the course regulations – even if not within the spirit. Providing your Project Sponsor is happy with what you are committing to deliver – because they aren't applying the academic criteria to their judgements – it doesn't look like there's any short-term problem.

The issue – for you – in the medium to longer-term is that you haven't developed your **ATTITUDE**, Knowledge, Skills and Execution (AKSE) to the level that you *could* have. Yes, you've got an entry on your CV that says you successfully scoped and managed an actual project. No, you haven't future-proofed yourself as much as you could have by developing *you* as a project outcome. I would argue the “you” who comes out the end of the team/project experience is every bit as important as the tangible products or intangible services you've worked on, because you will go on to many other projects of different kinds across your professional, community and personal lives. The opportunity for significant “stretching” that was not taken here will impact on your ability to deliver future outcomes that are as successful as they could have been in all of those areas. Unfortunately, there is no going back on the opportunity that exists now; once it's gone, it's gone.

Choice Two: High Delivery. Yes, it looks suitably impressive if you set yourselves some significant “stretch” objectives. They can certainly influence the level of support you are likely to get from your Project Sponsor. Whether you’re working with a start-up or an existing organisation, you should analyse the various environmental factors that impact on what they are doing; or are planning to do. Don’t forget to look at any competitors they have and what they are doing. Whatever targets you include in your Project Contract don’t necessarily have to be about being *bigger* than anybody else – they could just as easily revolve around being *better* in whatever criteria you decide are important. An important question to think about, especially when you’re setting numerical objectives, is how much “stretch” might be too much. You’re working to get a balance between something that’s exciting enough to be attempted and something where your chances of coming in under your objectives mean the commitment isn’t worth making unless some sort of miracle is going to happen.

Outcome One: Under-Delivery. One of the most effective ways I know of for alienating your key stakeholders is to deliver less than what you promised them in the first place. I know – you’re about to say: “*But Robbie, sometimes things happen that none of you could have reasonably foreseen at the time the contract was being prepared and signed off.*” I will absolutely agree with you on that one. That’s even an OK situation – **providing** you can explain what you did to deal with the situation and how you were still able to deliver as much of what was contracted for as possible under the changed circumstances. You might even have managed to deliver something of value that wasn’t originally contemplated, so under-delivery of the original objectives is balanced out by this new deliverable. Where under-delivery is **NOT OK** is if circumstances changed, you clearly knew about this, and didn’t do anything to try to mitigate the negative effects. Letting change happen unchallenged is not sending a good message about you to your stakeholders.

Outcome Two: Over Delivery. If you want to look good in the eyes of your key stakeholders, deliver more than you promised them in the first place. If you’re being really cynical about this, you might work out the easiest way to achieve it is to under-promise what you are confident you can deliver and then act all surprised when you beat the target. This strategy – if you are brave enough to try it – is a bit like a badly-done magic trick; easily seen for what it really is. If you are wanting good credibility with your stakeholders, this isn’t the way to go about getting it.

Over-delivery is best achieved by treating your Project Contract as a dynamic rather than static document, specifying *minimum acceptable outcomes*. In other words, it’s the level that you will work to avoid dropping below, rather than being a limit you cannot go beyond should the circumstances allow for that possibility. What you should be continually doing *as a matter of course* is continually scanning the various environmental factors that impact on your project so that you are aware of changes as soon as they become possible; or happen. This will allow you to react in an agile manner; and makes it possible for you to go beyond your original objectives, often within the existing resources you have available. Delivering more, at no or minimal (*and agreed before the investment happens*) extra cost, is a great way to increase your credibility as Li/MiTs.

Advice

- Before you start setting targets, it’s a good idea to carry out a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis on your project team. This will give you a good foundation on which to base the objectives you are going to commit to. Be honest with yourself when you do this – making extravagant claims just to look good to the rest of your team isn’t going to do you – or them – any favours if they find out the team has made commitments on the basis of claims that just aren’t true.

- It's probably also a good idea to do a SWOT analysis for the Project Sponsor's organisation as well. This will give you a more detailed foundation on which to build your understanding of who they are and what's really important to them.
- Make sure you are familiar with what each section of the Project Contract requires from you. This will help you make sure you've got the right content in each one, as well as minimising the chances of you making claims that go beyond what you are reasonably able to deliver.
- Varying what's in the original contract is always possible – but not just because you think anybody else won't notice, or that you won't be held accountable for any changes. Because your Project Contract is a dynamic document that represents a constantly evolving situation, there may be good reasons for deviating from what was originally written. I've got two recommendations for you if you think this is going to be the case:
 - Be clear about which stakeholders are going to be affected by any proposed changes.
 - Negotiate those changes with them. While they might be happy with a change that delivers more than was expected, they won't be happy if you didn't think they were important enough to negotiate with. They certainly won't be happy if you spring a negative performance surprise on them at the end.



You know you are expected to “deliver” as part of your project. Some Li/MiTs will operate on the basis that this means promising a big “truckload” up front – a “quantity over quality” approach – even if they haven't figured out how they are going to deliver all of it. Others will work on the reverse basis – better a high quality smaller load than a big truck only half-filled with lower-quality promises and outputs. The reality is that a truckload of missed promises isn't going to win you any friends or do anybody any favours.

Sometimes you need to take a different perspective...

Every one of us has ways that we feel most comfortable thinking about problems or opportunities. It might be how we've always thought, without consciously knowing why. It could also be something that we've been *trained* to do – maybe something we learned at school, or something that just seems to “fit” with the sorts of situations you find yourself in. Even if you don't always get the results you want, chances are you will keep on with what you know because, somehow, that's less scary than trying something you haven't done before.

A couple of things it's really important to understand are:

- If the only tool you have in your mental toolbox is a screwdriver, you'll approach every problem or opportunity as if it is best dealt with using only that tool. You will change the way you interpret whatever information you have however you need to in order to make that screwdriver work for you.
- If you keep using the same way of thinking you've always used, you will always get the same results – whether or not the screwdriver is the most appropriate tool to use.

Let me ask you a question, which I'll give you some potential answers for – and you can decide how many of those potential answers might be true for you. ***What have you got to lose by taking a different perspective on a problem or opportunity?***

- You're going outside your comfort zone. Welcome to the reality of projects. If you're making a case to play to your existing strengths, that offers something good to both the team and the project – providing you're not simply duplicating what one or more other team members are bringing to the party. If you're fighting to stay inside your comfort zone simply because you want to eliminate *any* risk attached to going where you haven't gone before, you might be in the wrong space with this team and project. Take the risk and you could well be positively surprised at what you are actually capable of.
- You have to convince the rest of your team to try something different, and that's going to take more time and energy than you've got – even assuming you *can* convince them all. Let's look at this another way – you've no evidence they aren't willing to be convinced, or that you aren't able to do that. Whether you see yourself as a leader or a follower, your effectiveness is going to be measured – at least, in part – by your ability to put forward convincing arguments. Here's your opportunity to develop that skill in real life and discover just how good you really are.
- You might not get a result that's as good as thinking the old way. That's always a possibility, but it's certainly not guaranteed. Like anything, the more times you try it, the better you get at it. It's like riding a two-wheeler bike – like me, I bet you fell off the first time you tried. If you were determined enough not to let the bike beat you, you climbed right back on and tried again. The more times you tried, the longer you lasted before falling off, and the further you went. Falling off – which is pretty much an uncontrolled stop – turned into a controlled dismount, but that improved result wouldn't have happened if you didn't keep on trying.
- You could learn something about what it means to be you; something that goes beyond what can be measured with academic marks. If you're treating this project as “just another school assignment” and this team as a “necessary evil” for accomplishing the project, that's shutting yourself off to some incredibly powerful discoveries that can completely transform how you think about yourself and what you are capable of.

Advice

- If you come into your team and your project thinking you know all the answers- either because you're brilliant, or because of some previous experiences – that is coming in with a closed mind.
- Accept that you won't know all the answers even by the end of this project – but you will know more than you did at the start.
- Try things you haven't done before; or stretch yourself a bit further with the things you are already good at. Understand that nobody – with the possible exception of you – is expecting perfection. What they *do* expect is that you honestly give it your best shot.



Same image – different perspectives. If you were telling stories, the differences in perspective created by colour versus monochrome could lead to different moods and, thus, different stories. It's not a case of one perspective being "right", meaning the other is necessarily "wrong" – each will simply have a context where it's a more appropriate perspective than the other. The same principle holds for the team and project decisions you need to make; the choice is for appropriateness, and that will often depend on the way the story is told.

Perfection versus Fit-For-Purpose

Brad Jackson's video, *Open Road*, a leadership profile of New Zealander Wade Thompson, the founder and CEO of American RV manufacturer Thor Industries, contains one of my all-time favourite quotations about applied leadership: "Aim for perfection, but settle for excellence." Perfection is that theoretical concept where some thing or action of ours could not be made any better, no matter what more was done to it. Balanced against that should be the concept of Fit-For-Purpose - doing exactly what is needed for a given thing or situation, but no more than that. Deep down, I can be a bit of a perfectionist, so let's just say I understand the conflict between these two when it comes to making decisions and taking actions.

Finding out what a situation requires is easier if you ask questions, rather than relying ONLY on your own inbuilt thinking and assumptions. You can learn so much from listening to the answers. One sometimes unexpected benefit from your questions could be the Project Sponsor becoming clearer about the results they expect, and why those results are so important to them. If you had unlimited time and unlimited resources – neither of which you have in the real world – you could aim for perfection. Perfection is a theoretical concept, though, and it's arguable whether it actually exists. That means a more realistic and achievable target to aim for might be "Excellence" – doing what you do as well as it can possibly be done with the resources you have available and taking into account the various environmental factors applying at the time.

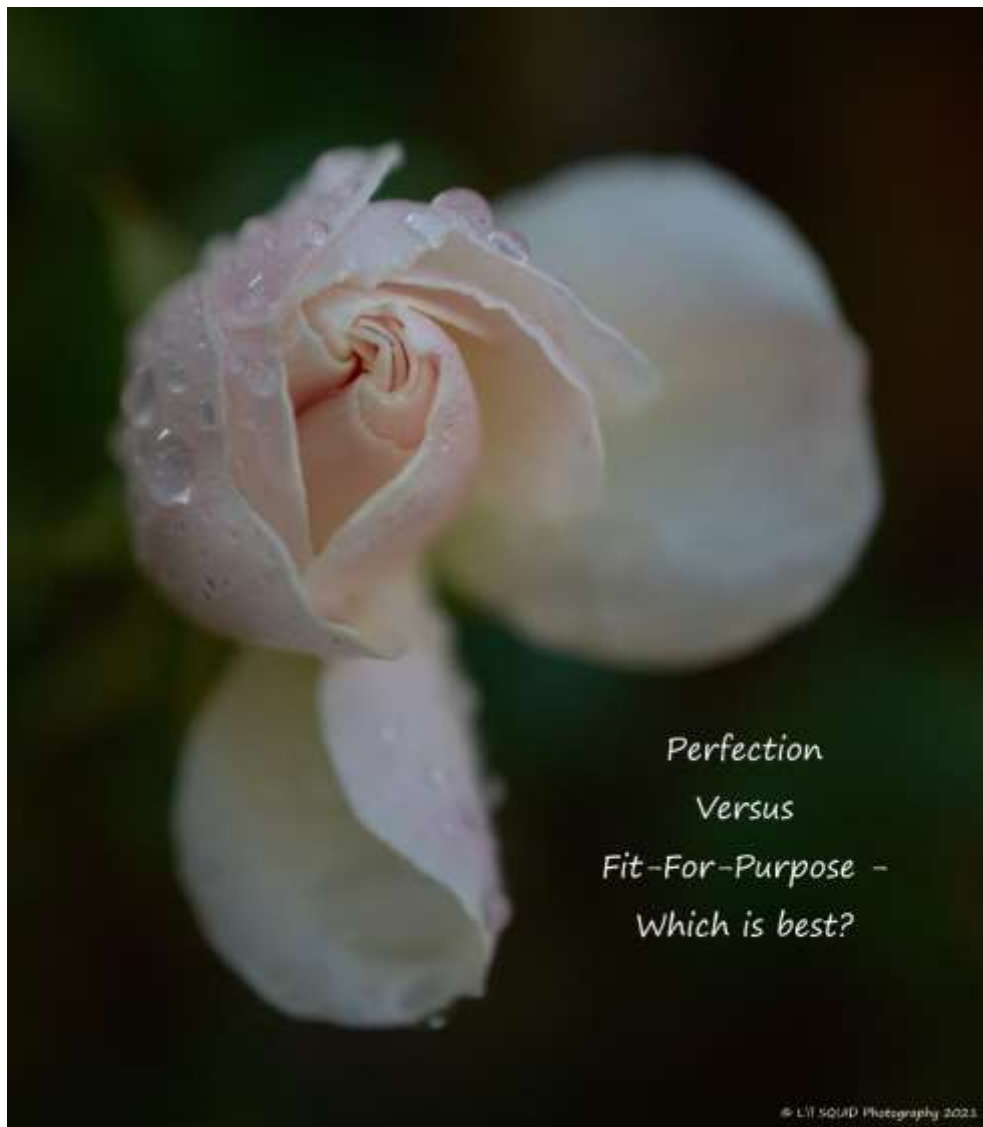
Even if your project is self-initiated, separating facts from opinions is going to be one of your most significant responsibilities. You're expected to come up with a plan to solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity, and that calls for an investment of resources.

It's worth thinking about whether or not the end users of whatever your project is creating will either notice or really care that much about something where you've gone a long way beyond your brief. As long as the result meets *their* needs, that may be enough for them. In fact, caring about how much you exceeded the specifications of your brief by may not matter to anybody except you. This is where you need to be realistic about how much of yourself it's worth investing in the *project* – but don't confuse that with meaning you can get away with investing very little of yourself in the *team*, because a Fit-For-Purpose team investment goes beyond doing the bare minimum necessary to ensure you make it to the end of the project.

Advice

- **Ask questions – plenty of them – to discover what outcomes the project requires.** It's unlikely that all your stakeholders will tell you everything *you* need to know - which is quite different from everything *they* think you need to know – without you teasing some of the details out from them.
- Be clear about *who* requires *what*, and how important those things are to them – because different stakeholders will have different needs and expectations.
- Put those stakeholder needs and expectations, once you've achieved clarity on what they are, into a formal hierarchy. This will help you work out which ones you are able to satisfy, and which ones are either not relevant or are outside the scope of your particular project.
- Challenge your own prejudices or pre-conceived ideas. Regardless of how long, or how strongly you have held them, do they match with the facts you have gathered as part of *this* project? You have an obligation to your stakeholders to work with the facts.

- Be open to the possibility of changing your mind about what Fit-For-Purpose or Perfection might look like in the context of your particular project. Never be afraid to learn and to grow.



Let's use this rose in my back garden as a metaphor to demonstrate the point:

- *Having survived the wind and the rain of the night before, it's lost a few of its outer petals, so a rose aficionado would not describe it as perfect. Maybe a photography aficionado could find technical faults with my shot that mean it's not a perfect image either.*
- *Is the rose Fit-For-Purpose? In my eyes as the beholder, yes. The missing outer petals did not take away from the beauty of the softly-coloured bloom about to open fully. The raindrops remaining made it more than "just another rose shot like lots of other people might shoot." It made me feel happy. For me, at that moment, happiness equalled perfection.*
- *Whether as a leader or a follower, we should never lose sight of the fact that the answer to this question is often subjective rather than absolute.*

Managing critical relationships outside the team

While the relationships you have within your project team are a critical part in determining the project's success, there are some other relationships with people outside the team that are equally important. You won't have the same level of direct influence and control over these external people because they won't be intimately involved with all of your deliberations or your actions – but they *do* have some pretty significant ability to influence your decisions. Your two most critical relationships outside the team are with your Project Sponsor and your Course Facilitator.

In a perfect world, the Project Sponsor would know exactly what they wanted, would always be available when you wanted them to be, and would always be appropriately grateful for anything and everything you do for them. It's going to come as a bit of a surprise to you to discover these things aren't necessarily true – and that their absence isn't a roundabout way of questioning your competence. Instead, it's a reflection of:

- Organisational circumstances you are unaware of, and which you may not be told the full detail of, but which impact on the work you were originally asked to do.
- The work you've done having sparked the Project Sponsor to think in some different directions to what were anticipated when the project was first scoped.
- The Project Sponsor perceiving that the talents and/ or interests of your team lie in a slightly different direction to what was originally envisaged for the project when it was first scoped.

Balanced against that, though, is the possibility that they *might be* disappointed in what you've delivered them. This can easily be the case where either you or they have failed to clearly communicate progress and issues on an ongoing basis. If something happens that means you can't deliver what was agreed upon at the start, you'd better believe that the Project Sponsor wants – no, **deserves** – to know about it before you blindside them at your project presentation, or when you submit your final report and anything else that was agreed upon.

Maybe you want to think about things like this: *It's not in the Project Sponsor's best interests not to support you to do your best possible work.* Keep in regular contact with them so they know what's going on. Their role is to support you with the substantive work of the project. That doesn't mean they will do the substantive work for you – if nothing else, they don't have time for it. It doesn't mean they will help you figure out the intricacies of setting up and running a project team – they don't have the time for that, and it's not something they've been briefed to expect.

Chances are that your relationship with your Course Facilitator is going to be a love-hate one. The things that are probably going to annoy you the most are the feedback and the marks you get. In your own minds, you've just about sweated blood to identify and solve problems and produce documentation supporting everything you've done, and it looks like they just don't appreciate how much hard work that was. Let me count off some of the reasons why you are likely to hate them:

- They aren't going to teach you a whole lot of *new* stuff as part of this project. They know you've already learned the vast majority of what you need to know and understand as part of the various courses you've done before getting to this final project. That means they will largely refresh things you should already know, with a thin layer of new and relevant learning over the top.
- They are probably going to expect something called “professional behaviour” from you – turning up for work *on time, every time*; “playing nicely” (working *with* each other rather than

against each other), tolerating differences between each other rather than reacting negatively against them, keeping commitments you make *every time*, or doing something proactive about it if you can't meet them.

- They are probably going to expect you to put documents together that look like they belong in a business setting as opposed to the sorts of things you were producing when you were “writing assignments” for your other courses. That means thinking about how they are laid out, making sure they are well written, that you've supported your arguments with facts or relevant “expert” opinions, and that they are all referenced back to credible and appropriate sources (**not** Wikipedia).
- They might come across as quite blunt in any comments they make, either in writing or verbally. They don't have time to write you a book, and they know you wouldn't read it even if they did, so written comments are usually kept brief. Similar reasoning applies to oral comments; they don't have time to go into great depth, so they are working on the basis that giving you specific content - that may actually be quite directive when you think about it – makes the best use of the time available for a conversation. Depending on how you feel at the time when you get the feedback, you might be upset or offended by the words. That's not their intent, so don't let yourself get trapped in a mindset that says it is.
- When they ask questions, those aren't because they want to catch you out. Questions are all about helping reveal additional things you could think about, or different ways you could think about points you made. They aren't looking for a `single right answer` as a response from you – what they want is a sign that you've at least *started* thinking about what possible answers could be, or that you are *prepared* to start this process.

If the picture I've painted here is one that seems depressing, I could tell you all sorts of stories about whole project teams that have convinced themselves they are on the receiving end of the most unfair treatment in human history. They've convinced themselves that it doesn't matter what they do – they simply won't be able to measure up to impossibly high and unrealistic standards. In some cases, they've allowed that mindset to go with them through however much time is left to complete their project. This has put them into an adversarial mode instead of a collaborative one, blinding them to what they might be capable of. They have chosen to be victims rather than Li/MiTs.

Advice

- Accept that, no matter how they might come across, your Project Sponsor and Course Facilitator **do** want you to do well.
- It's almost impossible to not have some sort of emotional reaction to your feedback or your marks.
 - With the good reactions, it's tempting to fall into the trap of not thinking about *why* you did well. My best advice here – as soon as you've come down off Cloud 9 – is to clearly identify, and then reflect on the things that were commented on in the feedback and then work out how you can make sure they are included in your future planning so you keep doing them.
 - Take a deep breath and pause before you react to any feedback about things you weren't perceived to have done so well – once you fire off that strongly worded email, or let those hot words out of your mouth, you can't take the words back. Yes, I know you can apologise, but that won't erase the memory of what was said and how it was said in the first place.

- If an immediate response to your feedback isn't necessary, put it aside for a period of time and don't even consciously think about it. This gives you time to let your emotions settle down so you can focus on what has been said, rather than your reaction to it.
- Ask questions – *lots of them*. You can be a lot more certain of the answers to your questions from whoever gave you the feedback than you can be about your *assumptions* about what they might *have* meant.
 - Pay careful attention the answers you get, and question anything you are still not sure of.
- Approach the team and your project with an open mind. You might know a lot from your previous experiences – this is your opportunity to come away knowing even more.
- Be prepared to lift your game to a level you may not have operated at before. **You are capable of it.**

Have a plan

There are two old truths that I've always liked in relation to the importance of planning. The first is a wonderful line from the children's book *Alice in Wonderland*, when the Cheshire Cat tells Alice that it won't matter which way she goes if she doesn't know where she's heading in the first place. A shorter version of that whole conversation might go along the lines of failing to plan being like planning to fail. Over the years I've worked with so many project teams where members were pushing to get straight into the action, for reasons that were usually one or more of the following:

- We know what we are doing – we're clever. The last thing we need is anybody else trying to regulate us.
- This can't be any more difficult than anything else we've done at this level.
- It's not a real project, because we're doing it under the umbrella of an academic institution (read: *school*).
- We don't know enough at the start of the project to make up a detailed plan, so we can just make it up as we go.
- Trust me, I know what I'm doing, so just follow my lead.
- We want to finish our project ahead of all the other teams (for whatever reason...).

That's not the definitive list of reasons, but you get the idea. Time spent in planning ahead of substantive action isn't perceived to be valuable in the overall scheme of things.

Let's assume your team has decided on the project you would like to work on. In order to convince both the Project Sponsor and the Course Facilitator that you should be allowed to work on it, you will need to put forward some sort of detailed, structured proposal that sets out how you intend to go about the work, and what outcomes your intentions will lead to. The less detail and structure, and the more hope you have in the plan, the less likely you're going to get the approval you need. That means thinking about what the desired outcomes are – which won't be the same for all project stakeholders – what you can achieve with the knowledge, skills and resources you currently have available, and what else you might have access to during the life of the project.

Your plan is appropriate for the time and other circumstances applying when it is created. That means it needs to have some flexibility in it, because the likelihood of *nothing* changing between the start and finish of a project is practically zero. You need to be thinking about which things are more likely to change than others, and how significant that change is likely to be (based on what you know and can reasonably predict now) It doesn't mean that your plan needs to be so detailed and structured that things can't change if necessary, because a lack of flexibility will have a serious negative impact on what you are able to deliver.

Who gets to create it – aside from the Project Sponsor, that is? Ideally, the answer is that everybody in the team (especially when it's only a small team to start with). You are much more likely to get passionate about achieving outcomes you've had a role in designing than when somebody else does that part of the thinking for you. Regardless of who's going to have (primary) responsibility for leading which part of the project, having the whole team involved in creating the plan gives it a better chance of success.

Document your plan. The more you leave out because "it's common sense", the more you've potentially got to argue about later because not everybody interprets "common sense" to mean the same thing. The same goes for the argument "*I will remember it*" – there's a pretty good chance you

won't. These points apply as much within your project team as they do between you and any external stakeholders. Plain language is best. There may be some specific terms you need to use because they are relevant to the industry in which your project is located, but even these should come with an explanation of what they mean the first time you use them.

What gets to go in it? There's no single "absolutely right" answer to this. The obvious answer here is: Whatever you negotiate with your Project Sponsor. The caution that goes with this is: Don't automatically assume they already know what they want. No matter what they might think before they start talking to you, there's a pretty good chance that some of that might change once they start voicing their ideas out. This conversation isn't one you have only when the project is being conceived and scoped. It's really one that should be ongoing through the life of the project to ensure that the person who commissioned the project feels like they are still a part of what is going on once they've signed their approval. It also means *you* don't get hit with any last-minute surprises. If there's one lesson that's absolutely critical here, it's this: COMMUNICATE – regularly, and without making assumptions about whatever who's on the receiving end of your message already knows or thinks.

Assuming you're working with the standard PMBOK format, no matter what cosmetic changes might have been made to it to suit course requirements, the overall project process is going to be pretty much "textbook". The details will be unique to your particular project, so those will need to be worked out to suit the needs of the various stakeholders. I think the critical point here – and this goes for every stage of the project – is not to promise anyone more than you can deliver. Whatever you promise is what they expect, and they won't be interested in excuses to try and cover why you under-delivered. This is a good reason for knowing what the skillsets are within your team – at least your promises won't be based on hope and guesswork. In a situation where you might be able to outsource some tasks, it's still useful to have a working knowledge of what is being done for you so you can decide whether or not that work matches the outcomes you had in mind.

What control measures are there for compliance? Despite your best intentions, there will likely be times when you either forget what you agreed to or think there's a reason – notice I didn't automatically call it a *good* one – to do something differently to what was agreed. It's easy to justify either of those things if it's you, and just as easy to get upset if it's somebody else doing it. Now imagine what happens if it's *everybody* in the team that's doing it. Even if each variation from the plan is minor, together they add up to something that significantly changes the original intent. This is why it's so important to have a process to check that what's happening in practice matches what you intended. It's also important that you stick to the process so you don't end up with any "surprises" you have to try and justify after the event – and when it's too late to get back to the original plan.

What process is there for changing the plan? If you go into a project thinking that the plan you eventually agree on, expressed as your Project Contract, will never need changing, that's an unrealistic and dangerous expectation. The world is a constantly evolving place. You only have to look at the response to the Covid-19 pandemic to see how many organisations needed to make massive changes to their plans in a much shorter timeframe than they would probably have allowed for previously. When it's been a case of "evolve or die", things that couldn't be done once upon a time suddenly become very possible indeed. When you think about the changes you've had to make in your own life – personally, in whatever your living situation is, work-wise – you can appreciate the sort of changes that a team might have to deal with in how people work together. Again, impossible things become possible.

When should you start it? Right now – today. The reality is you are starting even as you are putting your project team together, because you are thinking about what skills you bring to the table and then

trying to sort out some way to make that combination work for the project you have decided to work on. The longer you leave it to get started on a plan, the more pressure you put yourselves under when it comes to knowing what you are supposed to be doing and how it's going to be measured.

Put the plan somewhere that everybody who needs access to it has that *easily*. This means there is no barrier to them going back and checking what they are doing against what the plan says. Whenever the plan is updated, make sure that everybody who needs to know is informed about the change. Expecting them to find things on their own, especially when the change might be a minor one, or might impact on a number of different sections, is a dangerous strategy. **Never** deal in assumptions.

Advice

- Time spent on planning is **never** time wasted. It's an investment rather than a cost or a distraction.
- Especially in a small project team like yours, everybody should be involved in putting the plan together. There's no space for passengers in your team, and one of the best ways to get people invested in any project plan is for them to be actively involved in making it.
- Document your plan – in language that everybody who needs to refer to it can understand. Using all the fancy words in the textbook isn't going to impress anybody if they can't understand what you are telling them.
- No plan is ever going to be perfect, but an imperfect plan is always going to be better than no plan. Sometimes your plan will need to include information which only becomes available part way through a project – don't sit back and wait for perfection. Get started.
- Check your performance against the plan – regularly. There's no point in creating it if you aren't going to use it. Be clear about how much variance from the original is permissible before you have to initiate some form of remedial action.
- If you have to deviate (for *any* reason) from an original plan, at least you've got a benchmark position against which to compare and evaluate any changes. Make sure any changes are negotiated with relevant stakeholders, documented and communicated.

Time Management

There are some critical points I need to share with you, whether or not you will believe me. I've learned these things the hard way because I didn't want to believe they were as true as they turned out to be.

You will never have as much time as you need, or think you need. When you put your project plan together you work out the timing based on the things you already know, the things you think you need to discover, and any external constraints – like course timelines – that you have no choice about fitting in with. As you work through the project and the information you have changes, perhaps suggesting some different options that weren't part of your original thinking, that might also change the amount of time that you think you need to deal with this. You want to do the best project possible and not leave anything out.

The reality is that you have an agreed set of deliverables and those are what you should be focusing on unless you can make a clear case that one or more of them is no longer appropriate. Adding value by working on extra things that weren't part of the original deal isn't adding value at all if the original deliverables have not been dealt with first. If there are other things that you think need to be investigated in more depth, or trialed, these can always be presented as recommendations for extending the project once your agreed work has been completed.

The amount of work available will magically expand to fill the amount of time available. You create a timeline for your project. It's something you've all agreed is reasonable after consulting with your Project Sponsor and Course Facilitator. Everything has been carefully sequenced to ensure potential overload points are minimised, or even eliminated. You've even managed to fit in some contingency time here and there to allow for the fact that some tasks may need a bit longer in practice than they do in theory. Work with the intention of finishing tasks according to the allocated time rather than convincing yourselves there isn't that much need for urgency because there will *always* be extra time available. When you allow time to drift, you are likely to find yourselves doing more work than originally planned, but with less focus.

The reality is that if you aren't paying attention to what is happening, your contingency time gets all used up and is no longer available if you *really* need it. While everybody has their own responsibility to monitor progress against the plan, it's also a good idea to have somebody in the team with overall responsibility to compare against the plan. Continual checking – asking questions; and acting on the answers – can really help to keep the work expansion under control.

I do my best work under pressure – so please wait before giving me something else to do. For some people this statement is a bit of a joke while, for others, it's reality – in their own minds. Having the pressure of a deadline you can't move *does* reduce the scope for going off in other directions that are terrifically interesting but not necessarily relevant. It also reduces the amount of time available to *reflect* on what you are thinking and writing, to be comfortable that it's addressing the required points in the necessary depth. Pushing back start times for activities might be something that you can get away with in the short term, but you eventually end up in a position where you can't push them back any more. Pushing back not only moves your pressure point, but it also creates pressure points for others in the team who are depending on you to complete your tasks so they can complete theirs.

The reality is that *some* pressure may well lead to good work – but I'm not prepared to put my hand on my heart and guarantee it will lead to *better* work outputs. Changing when pressure points happen is never an individual issue in a team situation. There might be times when there's a really good reason

for pushing back, and it's going to be a lot more comfortable for the team dealing with it if it doesn't come as a surprise that it happened. Lesson here: Communicate, communicate, communicate – before it's too late!

For many of us, we've been more `into` time management than we might think. We generally get where we need to go by when we need to be there, especially when it comes to our social lives. We use the calendar function on our mobile devices without a second thought. Some people might go as far as one manager I had who maintained three different diaries (in different locations) – he seemed super-organised until you realised that the three diaries didn't communicate with each other, so there's definitely a lesson there. If we can manage it in that context, there's no reason why we can't practice good time management in the `work` context of this collaborative project now.

Advice

- Nobody else can manage your time commitments for you – so don't abdicate your own responsibility and expect them to do it.
- Create a project plan as soon as is practical. The time spent doing this is amongst the most valuable investments you will make in yourselves.
- Allow contingency time – but be aware that not every activity will need it, and not every activity will need the same amount of allowance.
- Stick to the plan wherever possible. The easier you make it to deviate from the plan, the more time issues you are likely to have as your final, non-negotiable deadline approaches.
- Make sure that every team member has access to the plan, and that every member is copied in on every update.
- Pushing your activity start times backwards – especially if nobody else is aware of this, might move your short-term pressure, but it creates medium and longer-term pressure for others in the team.
- The more you collaborate, the fewer unpleasant time surprises there are likely to be. Resources wasted on unnecessary time management disputes are resources that can't be used for anything else.



If you don't have a time management plan from the start – one that you try your best to stick to – it can easily feel like you are drifting in a mist and it controls you rather than the other way around.

There may be times when you have good reasons for real life not quite matching the plan, but you always have it to come back to. Change the plan if necessary – as long as you don't abandon all pretence of having a plan, because then you really can find yourself in trouble.

Set yourself up for the day

Have you ever **known** before your feet hit the floor in the morning what sort of day you are going to have? How many times has what you know actually come true? I wouldn't mind betting the answer to this second question is "More often than not." It's like some sort of magic is happening. The reality is that the magic comes from you making decisions and taking actions that are consistent with what you think you know. Whether it's a good day or a bad day seems to make little difference – the more convinced you are in your own mind that something's going to happen, the more likely it is to happen that way in real life.

You've maybe played the movie through in your own head of how the day's going to go. If the events are particularly important to you, the movie might have been played many times. Perhaps it always had the same ending; perhaps you tried several different ones you could choose between. You know what everybody else in the movie is going to say and do, just like you know what you are going to say and do – everything is so predictable. The more your imaginings keep coming true, the more you believe you can actually predict the future – that the universe either loves you or hates you.

What's really important is that **you** have the power to decide what sort of day you want to have. Nobody else has the right to do that for you, and they're only going to think they have it *if you let them*. I've never met anybody – at least, I don't think I have – who really *wants* to have a bad day before they even start. Good day or bad day – it's a simple choice, and it's **yours** to make.

It's worth thinking about who your positive role models are and why you chose that person, or those people. Having a role model shouldn't mean you want to copy them exactly – you'll get more value from identifying positive aspects of how they operate in *their* context and then *adapting* those to your own circumstances. Being your authentic version of those positive qualities is better than being a carbon copy you don't feel comfortable being.

It may take a little while for this positive way of "being" at the start of the day to begin feeling natural, especially if it's a significant change to how you've been setting yourself up for the day previously. Making the change is like taking medicine for the soul – positivity starts to feel more natural over time. You might notice an immediate change, but the deeper and longer-lasting change is something that may be more apparent to others than it is to you without some reflection on your part.

One caution here is not to focus so much on the positive that you don't allow for any possibility of negative events happening. You need to stay realistic, as well as allowing flexibility to change as events take place around you.

Advice

- Imagining how a day's likely to play out is perfectly normal, although it's probably not something that should keep you awake at night, even if you're imagining a good outcome.
- Make a deliberate decision to set yourself up for positive days in the context of your team and your project. This might simply be a continuation of how you think and behave normally, or it might be making some changes. Try not to change too many things at one time, because this will just make it difficult for you to work out which changes are leading to which results.
- If you need help to do something, asking for it is less scary than having to explain to the rest of your team why you didn't do something they were expecting.
- If you can't get the help you need inside your project team, look outside. Doing that might put you in contact with somebody who is more knowledgeable and experienced than anybody in your team. The counter to this, though, is to look inside your team before you go outside,

because you may already have some of the necessary expertise on hand. Using internal expertise is great personal development for the people on both ends of the deal.

- As much as you can, try to surround yourself with positive and successful people. When you're trying to decide who could be an appropriate role model for you, remember that "success" isn't *only* measured by social media "likes" and the number of expensive things somebody has. The way they treat people and the way they react to them says something a lot deeper and more significant about why they are looked up to.
- Allow time for any changes you make to settle down and become your "normal" way of thinking and behaving. If you have a day where things don't go as positively as you intended, that doesn't mean that your mindset isn't "working". Treat what didn't go according to the original plan as one or more Learning Moments; and commit to going back to more positive thinking again tomorrow.
- Reflect regularly on what it means to you to have and display a positive mindset. Make sure you record your thoughts in some permanent way rather than just trusting them to memory. This will mean you can go back to them – accurately – whenever you need to compare your actual performance against planned.



This image was recorded on Takapuna Beach, Auckland, on 8 December 2020. For me, this date is significant for two reasons. For my photography journey, it's the first time I'd ever got up to shoot a sunrise. As part of my professional journey, I'd travelled north to accept an award for Best Academic Presentation at the 2020 New Zealand Institute of Education Research Symposium earlier in the year. Both events represented the dawning of new possibilities for me that have already taken me on adventures that I didn't expect.

Hide away from distractions

Sometimes, you need to take the time to think things through thoroughly before deciding what to do next. Maybe you have some more research to do so you've got all the information you need to do that thinking. Problem is – you are a social animal and that means you are used to having people around you. More than that, your social animal style means you have to be interacting with those people. Maybe that's just paying some conscious attention to what they are saying and doing – whether or not it's relevant to what you are meant to be doing. Maybe it's *more* than that – maybe you need to *be a part of* what they are doing – to inject your thoughts into their drama and your words into their conversations, whether or not they ask for these things. *Then* you wonder why you didn't get your work completed, or why it wasn't as good as it needed to be, and why you aren't the most popular person in the room all of a sudden.

Hey, I'm human too, and I love my social media as much as anybody, but it's not actually *necessary* to be on it 24/7, *especially* if that's going to get in the way of getting your work done. My excuse is that I have it on in the background in case people need to contact me urgently for something that might be work or study-related – but that's really just an excuse most of the time, if the truth be known..

The answer is simple – **you** allowed yourself to be distracted. **You** can put as much effort as you like into blaming other people and events, but the truth remains: **YOU allowed** the distraction to happen. There is nobody else to blame – and playing the blame game simply invests time and emotional energy into something that isn't going to resolve the issue. Since there's nobody else to blame, that puts you in charge of the solution.

Maybe that means doing a deal at home so you swap doing a task now for doing it later so you can finish your work – but you better make sure you actually finish the work, or whoever took on your responsibilities is going to be pretty annoyed with you if you need still more time to do it, and they may not be so willing to cover for you in the future.

It's time to make a commitment. You need to separate work time from distraction time, and nobody else can do that for you.

Advice

- Turn the phone off. Let voice calls go to voicemail. Let text messages go to the mailbox. That's what mail is for. Unless you have a **specific** (and *genuine*) need to be reachable instantly, the temptation to switch focus from project work to incoming distraction is just too great.
- Check your email at set times. Disable the auto notifications that you probably have set to pop up on your screen – you probably might find it difficult to stop yourself being tempted to look if those little reminders keep appearing. Be tough on yourself when it comes to sticking to those times – I know from experience how easy it is to make excuses to check outside the set times and then, before I know it, hours have been diverted from the real task at hand.
- Other people *can* do activities and have conversations that you don't need to be a part of, so resist the temptation to inject yourself into what is going on that does not directly involve you.
- Think about where the most distracting workspaces are for you – then avoid them when you really need to be productive.
- Think about when the most distracting times of the day are for you – then make sure those are the times when you deliberately hide yourself away from the distractions. Let other people know this is when you need to be left alone, why, and for how long. If you're polite about doing this, most people will respect your needs.



We are so connected to information and people, no matter where we are, no matter what time of day or night, or day of the week. It's almost reached the stage for some of us where it feels unnatural to turn any of our devices off, or to be somewhere that there aren't plenty of people and lots happening all around us.

Best results for your team and your project will come from not allowing the distractions to become your job and your job to become a distraction.

It's OK to contemplate

If you're in a leadership or management role, you've probably felt pressure to know the answer to every question you get asked – instantly, and to have it right. Either one of those things on its own is not enough, because you know that the people depending on you expect both. Chances are those are probably the expectations you had of the people who were in charge of you, so you're just carrying those expectations forward to the other side of the relationship. Now you're on the other side, or close to being on the other side, you're probably starting to realise just how unrealistic those expectations can be.

The worst-case scenario is that you start not making decisions because you develop a fear of the (usually imagined) consequences of getting it wrong. Left unchecked, this can lead to decision-making paralysis – and you know that's a recipe for trouble. There might not be a lot of conscious thought going into this – you are just avoiding making decisions and hoping you can keep on getting away with it until such time as the problems go away on their own or somebody else solves them.

If these scenarios look like ones where you can't win, let's add some things into your thinking that can change your outcomes in a good way.

Firstly, know that it's OK to contemplate before giving somebody an answer to their question. Obviously, some questions might need more contemplation than others, depending on the complexity of the answer required, how much of the necessary information you already have, and how much your answer is going to push some established boundaries. Being fast with an answer is not always as useful as being right – or, at least, appropriate. My experience is that most people are usually prepared to trade off a little speed in exchange for a bit more certainty in what's being communicated.

Contemplate collaboratively. You're right at the beginning of a significant *collaborative* experience. If you are working together, why can't you be contemplating together? If a question needs an answer, is it more important that one particular person voiced it out, or that you could buy into it as a collective? One brain applied to a problem might come up with a really good answer. Multiple brains applied to the same problem, coming at it from different viewpoints and previous experiences, is probably going to come up with a better answer. Assuming that ego is an important part of how well an answer ends up being implemented, more people having ego-ownership of it through collaborative contemplation will usually lead to better implementation.

Contemplation isn't *only* about coming up with immediate answers to pressing problems. It's also about some of the personal background thinking that isn't necessarily connected directly with your current team or project. It can easily connect with a personal SWOT analysis or reflection – a typical part of a Project-Based Learning (PBL) course. My experience is that because this is usually the last task to be completed for assessment, it's also the last to be started – sometimes only a day or two before it's due. Somebody then has to try to think backwards to all the significant events during the life of the team and the project, and remember how they felt about them, why they felt that way, what they would do the same way in future and why, what they could do differently in future and why... You get the story – that's a lot of contemplation all being done at the last minute, and without the benefit of all those contemplative thoughts having been recorded at the time when they should have been happening...

There are three potential solutions to this particular contemplative problem:

- Contemplate on your own performance on a *regular* basis. Take the time – *no* – **make** the time to stare off into the distance, or whatever else works for you, and think about all those points I mentioned.
- Record the results of your contemplation in some permanent form – writing is not the only choice you have – and make sure you store them somewhere you can find them again later when you need to.
- Since a lot of the work on your project is being done collaboratively, why not do some collaborative contemplating? Your view of your own performance is not the only one that matters in your team – so does everyone else’s. Your view also matters for each of the others. Be brave, be constructive, and contemplate together. That doesn’t mean you have to agree with everything that everyone else says, but it does give you a deeper basket of facts and opinions to integrate with your own contemplation. *The most successful teams I have ever been involved with made a point of doing this. In fact, they built it into their Standard Operating procedures that any contemplation to do with personal performance issues must be done collaboratively.*

Advice

- Contemplation – for *most* people - is easier to do before you speak something out, although some people do contemplate more effectively when they can vocalise their thinking process. The fact that your members do engage in contemplation is more important than them using any one particular method.
- Collaborative contemplation is about generating greater input into, and ownership of the outputs of the problem-solving process. It’s also a really useful way of getting greater insight into the reasons behind your personal performance, what you should repeat in the future, and what you should look at changing.
- Record your contemplation – both the results and the outcomes. That way, you will be able to revisit your ideas whenever you need to.
- If contemplation throws up more alternatives rather than immediately arriving at a solution, it’s still doing what it’s meant to.
- Contemplation is not just about solutions – it’s also about engagement. The level of engagement across the team will determine its likely success.



Purely a personal thing – I find that my most effective contemplation happens when I’m in the garden. If I’m near one when I’ve decided to contemplate on my own, I will go and find one. If I’ve got my camera with me, I will lose myself in shooting off a few hundred images. While image composition and technical settings have been in the front of my mind, the back of my mind has been contemplating on the issues of the moment. The contemplation might not be fully formed by the time I put the camera down, but it’s generally a lot more comprehensive and cohesive than it was before I started.

If I was doing a collaborative contemplation, I might not go into the garden, because that’s not everybody’s relaxing place, but I would definitely want somewhere we could concentrate on the contemplation without as many as possible of the distractions of modern life that we seem to take for granted these days.

Get out and smell the sunshine

How many of us have felt the need to do more, to do it faster, and be better at it? Sometimes it feels like we have to do all three of these things. When we look at everything else we already have to do, the inescapable conclusion is that doing more is the only answer. The boss keeps talking about how important productivity is and how our people are what allow us to out-compete the competition. Add to that the perceived weight of customer expectations, and we are caught in this virtue trap of not wanting to be seen as the person letting the rest of the team down.

Maybe we are the boss, and we are trying to set an example for our followers and other colleagues of what “being productive” looks like. Maybe we are so wrapped up in our own imagination of what a productive leader should be doing that we fail to recognise our level of emotional commitment and investment is more than we can reasonably expect of others.

Either way...

As much as you might think (or like to believe) you are a machine when you need to be, remember this: Even machines need to be refuelled or recharged to operate at their optimum level of performance. When you feel your performance starting to drop off - be honest with yourself and those around you - Stop. Go outside, turn your face to the sky, and smell the sunshine. Be in just that sunshine zone for 10 minutes; think of nothing else. Ten minutes isn't some “magic” number – it's just that experience tells me anything less than that isn't going to give you enough time to mentally switch between work and non-work settings, relax a little and then come back ready for focusing on work again.

During that ten minutes, the last thing you should be thinking about is anything to do with your project, or even your team. Focus on how you feel and why you feel like that. Think about what might make you feel even better, and what you could do to make that happen.

Advice

- Take a break. Working without a break doesn't make you a hero, and it doesn't set a good example to anybody else, whether you are a leader or a manager, or a subordinate.
- There might be times when you *do* need to put in a longer-than-normal effort on a particular task – maybe you have a deadline that can't be moved. The key point here is that you should have to justify this on a case-by-case basis rather than accepting that it's simply “the way things are.”
- Get outside and smell the sunshine.



Deliberately make the time to look up – that's where the sunshine energy comes from. That energy won't come to you from a packet or a bottle, or from wishing you had it. It will only come because you choose to go and find it in the fresh air.

Communication basics

If I look back at all the times I've been asked to step into the middle of conflicts in project teams, or the odd occasion where I've felt the need to do that without being invited in first, there's one consistent thing that stands out as the reason – communication - either done poorly or not done at all. People not doing things that are reasonable, not doing things they agreed to do, or even not reaching agreement at all but pretending they have so they can move on with their project in the mistaken belief that the lack of agreement can just be ignored as long as they make it to the end.

Sometimes, people are so determined to say what they want to say that they don't stop to think about the effects that might have on not only whoever's on the receiving end of their communication but also anybody who's a witness to it, whether in real time or after the event. It's like, in a moment of brain fade, theirs is the only voice that matters. Once the words have been said, they cannot be taken back. Sure, they can apologise for having said them or written them – maybe some people will even remember the apology better than they remember what caused it in the first place - but don't bet your last dollar on that.

Somebody you're probably going to have to deal with is the keyboard warrior. That's the person who feels brave enough to say stuff hiding behind their keyboard – not just in emails or text messages but, increasingly, via social media – that they probably wouldn't say to somebody's face. The stuff that's so inflammatory because of how it's been said that you don't even stop to consider whether there's any objective truth behind it – you just want to lash out in response. It's easy to be brave when you aren't eyeballing someone. I've seen plenty of instances where, had they happened in a workplace instead of in a team of Li/MiTs doing a project as part of their studies, somebody would likely have been dismissed for gross misconduct. Just because that's where you are right now, doesn't mean that the behaviour standards you will be held to are somehow less.

Who was the communication intended for? That's who should be on the receiving end of it, and nobody else. Bringing other people into the loop who don't need to be in it is unprofessional, time-wasting, and potentially creates new problems without solving old ones. You aren't in some competition where the person with the most "friends" at the end is the "winner", and you aren't doing yourself any favours running around looking for them. Of course, the other side of this is that you don't leave people out of communications who *should* be involved. Leaving people out is only going to make your own life more difficult because you're going to have to deal with the consequences – jobs that don't get done; or aren't done correctly because people don't have all the information they need, as well as the feelings that go with people thinking being left out might have been deliberate.

Think about the language you're using. You might understand *perfectly* what you *intend* to say, and what you *did* say. How sure are you that everybody else understands your words to mean exactly the same things? What makes you that sure? Don't make the assumption that everybody else you communicate with knows all the same things you do. Unless you're all carbon copies of each other, that's simply not going to be true. Assumptions are quick, easy, and often wrong - so deliberately checking that people have a shared understanding of what words and phrases mean *in the context in which they are being used* is probably one of the most useful things you can do. Make your meaning clear – change your language if you need to, rather than hoping people will understand your meaning by magic.

Does everybody you are communicating with in your project team, and outside the team, but for the project, work in the same language? If not, do you know that the words and phrases you're using translate into whatever languages other project stakeholders are using with exactly the same meaning you are using? Some words and phrases just don't have direct equivalents in different languages, meaning somebody who works in a different native language is likely to go for the *nearest similar* translation – without knowing how different what they've understood is from what you had in mind. They don't speak up about this and suddenly people are making decisions and taking actions on the basis of different meanings, each one believing *their* understanding is the correct one. Don't be surprised when this leads to some outcomes that are *way* different to what might have been expected.

You will learn a lot more by listening with your ears than with your mouth. Finishing somebody else's sentence for them before they got to the end – at best, you might be guessing and, at worst, you weren't listening with enough respect to let them finish. They might have been about to say something you never would have thought of, but you'll never know now. You expect other people to listen to what you have to say – that's not high on their list of stuff to do if you aren't listening to them. Listen also "between the lines" - sometimes what *isn't* directly said is at least as valuable as what *is* said. That means paying attention, as well as asking appropriate questions to clarify anything you aren't sure about.

Assumptions are often made that some things don't need saying because they are just so obvious - everybody will know them. I'm talking really basic stuff here – dates, times and locations of meetings, agendas for meetings, what work they are supposed to have completed, what standards apply to that work... If you don't specify all these things, you're simply increasing the probability of people making incorrect assumptions.

With body language, some messages you send to others might be completely unintentional on your part. I'm not talking about things like rolling your eyes back in your head or coincidental sighs when somebody says or does something – the eyes and sighs are more likely to be deliberate rather than accidental. What I've got in mind are things you might do completely unconsciously, but which can send a message totally different to the one you think you're sending, like:

- You want to sit somewhere but sitting on a chair is a bit formal or inconvenient – so you perch your bottom on the nearest table top. Even if you think you're "leaning" rather than "sitting", you've still sent a message of cultural insensitivity to anybody whose culture doesn't sit on the same surface food might be served from – and you didn't even know it.
- When you're really paying attention to whoever's speaking, maybe you look a bit vacant. You might even lean back in your chair. You're just getting comfortable so you can focus on the speaker's message – but they think you're bored and "switching off."

Advice

- Be clear about what you want to communicate before you try. If *you* aren't clear about what you're trying to say, why would you be surprised about other people not being clear either?
- Be clear about who your audience needs to be – and who doesn't need to be in your audience. "Spray and pray" communication wastes as much time and energy as communication that is deliberately not directed only at where it needs to be. You're working on a serious project – you don't have time for ego games, so keeping things professional; is definitely the way to go.
- Think about the words you use and the way in which you intend using them before you actually use them. Just because you know what you mean to say doesn't mean anybody else is going to take them with the same meaning. Using complicated words when simple ones would do just as well doesn't automatically mean you are using them correctly. If somebody's

reluctant to say they aren't sure what those words mean because they don't want to look silly in front of anybody else, don't be surprised when they do something you didn't expect, because your fancy words set them up for that.

- When you are making plans or giving instructions, **check** that everybody affected by them understands them to mean the same thing. Avoid assumptions, no matter how logical *you* think they are.
- When things you agreed to change – and that's the nature of projects – make sure that everybody who needs to know has access to the appropriate information as soon as they need it, and in a form they can understand.
- Words are actually really powerful weapons that can break people down as easily as they are used to lift them up. Attacking a person – for *whatever* reason – is **never** acceptable, no matter who chooses to do it, or who's on the receiving end of it. If the person on the receiving end responds in the same way, suddenly you've got a dangerous ego contest where there's only going to be one "winner" – if you can call them that – and everybody else loses. The longer the attacking or undermining goes on for, the more time and emotional energy are diverted from the work you are supposed to be doing.
- If things are getting a bit dramatic in a communication, go smell the sunshine for a few minutes before you do something you'll end up regretting
- You have a set of Standard Operating Procedures that spell out your intended communication strategies. Presumably you all had input into those and agreed to them voluntarily – follow them.
- The clever people ask for help when they aren't sure what to do next. The brave or not-so-clever people trust in miracles that communication or other problems will miraculously resolve themselves. Be one of the clever people.



White – the colour that is traditionally linked with peace and harmony. Red – the colour that is traditionally associated with high emotion and conflict. Both have a place in your communication. While the white state is where you should ideally be operating most of the time, conflict doesn't have to be negative in order to be useful.



Uncontrolled communication can lead participants towards MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction). That's why sorting out your communication basics and stating them in your Standard Operating Procedures right from the start is so important. The last thing you want to be doing is trying to do is sort out communication problems once people start getting dramatic because things aren't going the way they think they should.

Negotiation Ⓞ War

Why negotiate? Because you want something you don't currently have and which is important to you, or because whoever you're negotiating with wants something they don't currently have and which is important to them. It's as simple as that. I could write a whole book on why something so simple in theory becomes so complex in practice – in fact, lots of people have already, so I'm just going to briefly touch on what I think some of the most important points are to keep yourself out of unnecessary trouble.

Right up front, I'll say that one of the problems I've seen most often and had to get involved in trying to sort out, is failed negotiation. While the people involved might be different – and sometimes it's been the same people more than once – the reasons pretty much don't change. Let me introduce you to some of my favourites:

- Treating negotiation as a war. The thing about war is that it's the only game in town where there can be no winner, no matter what the end result. War results in a lot of hurt feelings, both within your project team and between your team and any external stakeholders you are negotiating with. Once negative emotions start getting in the middle of your interactions, they start coming between you and logical decisions. You need to get your heads around this fundamental principle: Effective negotiation means both sides ending up with as much as possible of what they wanted originally. That's not the same as one party getting everything it wanted, because that usually means the other party losing something that's really important to them.
- Failing to prepare – you know that old saying: "Fail to plan and you plan to fail." *Nowhere is this truer than with negotiation.* If you don't know what it is you want, what do you expect the other party is responding to? The harder you make it for them to respond, the harder it's going to be to reach agreement. Assuming you won't get everything you started out wanting, what are you prepared to give up to reach a solution acceptable to both parties? Why not take this line of thinking a bit further and think about what the other party might want, and what they might be prepared to compromise on to reach agreement? As part of this process, you're also going to identify which points are "bottom line" – in other words, the things that are so important they won't be compromised on just to reach an agreement.
- Work out – in advance – what role everybody who is involved in a negotiation is going to play. There has to be a reason for that person, or those people, to be there in the first place. If they don't have an active role to play, they don't need to be there – it's not like you're playing to an audience.
- Not listening to what is being said. No matter what you've imagined the other party might say, it pays to listen to what they *actually* say, and the way in which they say it. There are some seriously good clues to their thinking in what gets said – just as there are seriously good clues for them in the way you say what you have to say. To be absolutely clear on what was said, practice "active listening" and ask questions. Let them say what they have to say first – it's rude to interrupt. Then you can ask much more targeted questions.
- The use of silence - I've absolutely loved this one since I was taught about it by somebody who's a professional negotiator. You're not going to put your entire position out there right at the start of a negotiation, because you need to leave yourself some room to make changes or compromises as the negotiation progresses, but without losing focus on your original objectives. The other party's going to do exactly the same, for the same reasons. Something

that's very real is that most humans hate silence in the middle of a conversation - and somebody's eventually going to fill it in. Hold your nerve - make sure it's the other party, because that's a great way to get them to reveal more of their position without you having to ask specific questions to get that information. For anybody who thinks it doesn't work – the longest conversation I ever timed in one of my negotiations was four and a half minutes. The other party broke first, gifting me precious information I could then use to guide us both to an outcome where both of us ended up with more than either of us would have had if I wasn't prepared to hold my nerve and let the silence play out. My only caution here would be not to use this tactic for every point in a negotiation, or it quickly loses its effectiveness.

- Making decisions “on the fly” – not going back to what your original plan was before making a decision that you might later regret. Unless a decision is for something life-threatening, there's no reason why you can't take some time to think before you commit. In a worst-case scenario, there's no reason why you can't walk away from a negotiation.
- Feeling like you're under pressure to make a quick decision. If the other party is putting you under pressure to agree to something quickly, you might want to start wondering why that is. If there's no obvious need for it, that probably means there's something they are holding back that won't necessarily be good for you if you discover what it is. Agree when you've decided it's right for you to do so – and that point will be indicated by your original plan. Be prepared to pause negotiations in order to gain some thinking time for yourselves – and to allow some thinking time for the other party. The better your thinking, the better your eventual agreement.
- Not treating people with respect. The reality, when you attack the people instead of debating the idea is that you upset people. When that happens, some people are going to go all quiet and passive on you – but that doesn't mean you've beaten them. The might just go all resistant on you as well. Other people might go all loud and aggressive on you – and you can guarantee that means total resistance.

I've focused here on what happens when your project team negotiates with external stakeholders. You're probably wondering what the differences are if the negotiation is only happening within your team. Reality: Not much. You need to prepare in advance and behave in the same ways you would if negotiating externally – for exactly the same reasons. If you get the feeling you're in a war zone, call a “time out” and revisit your strategy.

Advice

- Plan and prepare **before** you attempt to negotiate. Be clear about what you want and why it's important to you. Be clear about what you're prepared to compromise on to achieve your “bottom line” objectives. Make sure that part of your planning involves thinking about how the other party would answer all the same questions you just asked yourselves, and why.
- If whoever you're negotiating with is “the enemy” that has to be destroyed, perhaps you aren't the best person to be negotiating for your side. Either change your attitude or step aside from a lead negotiating role. The people, on the other side are just as human as you, and they deserve to be treated with respect.
- Be clear who is playing which part in the negotiation – and what limits might apply to decisions they can make without having to refer to anybody else. This should be something that is clearly specified in your Standard Operating Procedures – you should never be going into a negotiation trying to work this out as you go, because that's just inviting trouble.
- Pay attention to what is being said – not just on the other side, but also on your side. What message are you getting – or giving - from the choice of words or the way they are delivered?

Is it consistent with previous messages? Ask questions to clarify any areas of uncertainty. When you do this, remember that questions are for discovering rather than for accusing.

- Make it possible for the other party to tell you what's important to them, and why. Silence on your side is a powerful invitation for them to do this, *providing* you are prepared to listen respectfully when they start to fill it in.
- Take as much time as is necessary to reach a decision. When deadlines start getting waved around, you need to think carefully about how real they are. That doesn't mean there won't be times when they are both genuine and necessary, but it also doesn't mean that just because something has been said it's the only option there is. Feel free to ask questions to discover what lies behind what's been said.
- If you're being forced into an agreement you don't feel comfortable with – maybe you feel like you're being seriously disadvantaged – there's nothing stopping you putting forward alternatives, suspending negotiation, or even walking away from a negotiation. Do what you can to make sure you aren't putting the other party to a negotiation in this situation – remember that effective negotiation is a two-way street.



Do you feel like your negotiation is going around in in some sort of spiral and there are all these little points that are going to poke you if you make a wrong decision? Even if you've got a plan that anticipates what all those point might look like as you negotiate backwards and forwards, there are other things that will somehow end up in the middle of what's happening – nobody's quite sure where they came from, and it looks like it's going to be a lot of work to get them out, just like the bits of soil and dead twigs in the middle of this succulent. Do you just ignore all those in the belief they don't really matter, or do you allow yourselves to get distracted by them and deal with each in turn in the belief this will lead to the perfect negotiation? Effective negotiation means never taking your eye off the objectives your plan is geared towards. It also means making decisions about what things are really important enough to distract you from the plan as it was originally conceived.

What happens in case of “disaster”?

I use the term “disaster” quite loosely. I’m generally not thinking of anything dramatic like an earthquake flattening half the city. I’ve experienced various technology failures before and during presentations, and once even a building evacuation in the middle of a presentation. Today, though, it’s more likely to be a lockdown as part of the response to a global pandemic, meaning the presentation has to be done remotely instead of face-to-face. While “disaster” is a term that’s used frequently by Li/MiTs, it’s also one that’s not always used in the right context.

I’m going to share with you one particular event which members of the project team perceived as a “disaster” of massive proportions when they first became aware of it, but which proved to be a misunderstanding over the importance of something that was tangential – at best - to their project

I got a rather frantic email late one night from a project team leader saying that their Project Sponsor had just emailed her saying that their plans had changed and the project no longer formed part of where they thought their organisation was going to be heading. They were understandably distraught about this because it meant 14 weeks’ work was now valueless, they were two days away from driving 200 kilometres to present the results of that work to the Project Sponsor, and their ability to pass the course had been destroyed by a circumstance they could not reasonably have foreseen and which was totally out of their control. Nobody in the team thought this was fair on them, and they didn’t know what to do about it. Would I please tell them what they should do next?

Looking at the email the Project Sponsor had sent her, I didn’t read it the same way the team had. One email back and forth with the Project Sponsor the next morning and the problem (which wasn’t a problem at all) was sorted and the “disaster” no longer existed. The point is that the team could have resolved this themselves, but they were so caught up in the idea that a “disaster” had happened they couldn’t see beyond that, and it completely dominated their thinking. When I told them what I’d done the next morning, they admitted the training I’d given them up to that point of the course should have allowed them to see beyond their initial reaction to ask questions before leaping to a conclusion that wasn’t supported by any facts.

That’s an example of something that – however unlikely – could happen *outside* your project team. Perhaps your most likely “disaster”, though, is something that happens *within* your project team. It’s something that, *in theory*, **shouldn’t** happen because you’ve discussed and agreed your Standard Operating Procedures. This “disaster” comes in two types:

- A team member not performing up to the agreed expectations. Maybe they miss a deadline, or the quality of a particular piece of work isn’t what it should have been. You also need to think about whether it’s a one-off problem, or if it’s something that could be forming a pattern.
- Team members who just don’t get on. The reality of people working together is that they probably won’t love each other all the time. Things will be said or done – usually without any bad intentions – that just don’t sit well with whoever’s on the receiving end. You don’t have to love each other all the time, but you should be able to tolerate each other and act professionally at all times.

One area that can be really difficult to know how to handle because it’s so subjective and *personal* – and it may show up through either of the previous points – is when a member’s issues are affecting the team’s performance; but seem to have a cause that’s disconnected from anything the team is

working on or the way the work is being done. This is quite rare, in my experience, but can be quite traumatic if it does happen. Only twice, where I've been invited in to try to help resolve team issues, have I had to either strongly recommend or arrange for specific professional support for Li/MiTs outside what I was qualified to do myself. I knew those actions weren't going to make me popular with certain people, but what was important was preventing avoidable harm coming to valuable human beings.

I think there are four really critical points here:

- Be wary of making judgements about the lives other people are living based on your own lived experiences. No matter how much or how little they choose to reveal to you about their lives outside the project team, you don't really know what's helped to form the attitude or behaviours they bring to work. As a case in point, I once worked with somebody that most other people on the team thought was an alcoholic, principally because of how her breath smelled. The truth – which it wasn't my place to reveal to them – was that she was diabetic. This leads to my next point -
- There are limits to what you can ask about, especially if it has no direct connection to your team or your project. Remember that what you might be interested in knowing – because other humans are such fascinating creatures, after all – may differ substantially from what they feel comfortable telling you. Yes, I know people tell the whole world stuff in the social media universe that they won't tell anybody face to face, but that's no excuse for prying.
- What is said within the team has to stay within the team. End of point – no further explanation necessary.
- Before you decide to exit somebody from your team – no matter how tempting that might be as a first reaction – understand that your decisions will *affect somebody else's life*, so think carefully **before** you do an action you might want to undo later; or wish you had been able to. Sanctions aren't just about your perceived ability to earn "marks" – they can have consequences far beyond what you originally intended.

Are you expecting somebody else to step in and make the disaster go away for you? I guess it would be nice if that happened, but that's usually not the way life works, for two reasons:

- Firstly, somebody would need to be watching you closely enough to see when things were about to go wrong and be ready to step in at a moment's notice. While they are so focused on what you are doing, that means they can't be doing any of the other things they are meant to be doing. The question is whether that says more about the way *you* are performing or about the way *they* are performing.
- Secondly, if one of the most valuable things you learned as part of this project is that there's always somebody else who will save you – whether it's from outside circumstances or from yourselves – rather than you having to take a significant role in managing through problems, that's not real life.

An inevitable part of our projects is that there will be times when you need outside guidance and support to work your way through problems you aren't equipped, or don't have the resources to deal with on your own. That's OK, and it's why you have a Course Facilitator who sits above you in the formal hierarchy, but alongside you in reality – to do just that. As unlikely as it may seem when your projects have hardly started, or later when you are seriously into them, **you** are expected to take a lead role in risk identification and risk management. Your projects are the opportunity for you to develop and practice the necessary skills in a relatively protective and supportive environment.

Does that mean some “disasters” will be allowed to happen to you? Massive events that you won’t be able to recover from? Not if these can reasonably be foreseen – you should expect to be given guidance on how to move around these or avoid them altogether. Even if they do happen, you should expect to be guided to look for ways around the worst of their effects. The positive learning that comes from dealing with situations is way more important than the doom and gloom that comes from allowing situations to deal to you.

Advice

- Many things that might qualify for the application of the “disaster” label are things that can reasonably be foreseen and have contingency plans developed as part of the original scoping of the project. That makes them a challenge rather than a “disaster”.
- Think about whether your first and subsequent reactions are going to be transactional or transformational. That’s why you need to think before you open your mouth or let your typing fingers loose.
- You also need to think about whether any of your actions might have *caused* the “disaster” situation. If they did, or if they might have, take the opportunity to use the situation as a Learning Moment rather than a Punishment Opportunity.
- Ask questions – plenty of them – to try to understand what is happening. Assumptions should be avoided because they are usually subjective and sometimes don’t have a lot of provable facts involved in making them. You can’t deal effectively with a situation unless you understand its potential causes.
- Look for the positives in any situation. This might take a little more effort in some situations than in others, but it’s usually worth the effort. The positives are your building blocks for the future, whether for this current team or project, or the ones that will come in your future.
- Try to avoid being judgemental about what might be causing somebody to behave in a way you don’t like, or don’t approve of. You aren’t living their life, dealing with their circumstances outside of what you experience within the team.
- Go to your Standard Operating Procedures if somebody in the team isn’t performing in a way that’s consistent with established team expectations. Because these should have been negotiated before the substantive project work started, you’ve not only got some defined standards to measure performance against, but also some processes you agreed to follow if things weren’t going so well and performance needed to be aligned with expectations again.
Follow them.
- Reach out for help. Be honest enough to admit when you need it – because that’s what the cleverest people do, and there’s no reason *you* can’t be clever people.

Dispute resolution

While your Standard Operating Procedures cover every aspect of how your team operates dispute resolution is always something that I talk about separately because of the likelihood that you will need this process before you are through. I know – you can get on with anybody, and that means there's no need for your project team to spend time creating a dispute resolution process you are never going to need. Right now, at the start of your team and project journeys, you probably see this as something that's just getting in the way of getting on with the project itself.

Trust me on this: Very few of you will get to the end of the project without experiencing at least one situation where you were glad you had a process to fall back on. Think of a dispute resolution process as similar to paying an insurance premium to protect something that's valuable to you. You hope you never have to make a claim but, if you do, it's reassuring to know that you've already paid for that help to happen. It's also a lot easier to sort a process out when you aren't already in the middle of a problem.

If we had time, I could tell you some real horror stories about people who all said they would never have a dispute they couldn't manage, as well as the outcomes which weren't always pleasant. There's the team where three of the four members kept on trying to fire the fourth member for repeatedly failing to meet performance standards; but relied on enforcing the rules rather than trying anything constructive to help the member deal with the various issues. There's the team where the formal and informal leaders ended up in a screaming match over something that was incredibly trivial and I ended up having to literally step in between them before either of them did something they would regret. There's the team where one member decided to attack – orally and in writing - another member because of some particular physical challenges that member had and which in no way impacted their mental capacity to undertake the project work. There's the team member who decided they didn't like the way the leader was carrying out their role and complained to anybody and everybody who would listen behind the leader's back – but absolutely refused to face the leader or engage in any form of constructive or collaborative problem solving. The list goes on...

Your Standard Operating Procedures should clearly specify what acceptable performance is like. The next thing you'll need to decide is what constitutes a "dispute" that's significant enough to need a formal process to help with its resolution. The reality is that we disagree with each other all the time – it's a natural part of learning the things we need to know to do what we need to do. Sometimes, though, you get yourselves in a position where you get trapped in the emotions of the moment and have trouble seeing the facts, and that's where you get the benefit from having a process that everybody understands – because it's the one *you* created.

Something you need to be really clear on here is that the primary purpose of dispute resolution is **NOT** punishment. That's not to say that there might not be some punishment involved later down the track, but that's a last resort when nothing else has worked. Much as I hate to say it, you should also have something in the process about the need to exit somebody from the team if all else fails. The real-world consequence of non-performance or non-improvement is exit from the organisation, and there's no reason why your team should have to carry anybody who isn't willing to perform to the best of their ability.

Let's take a few steps back, though, and focus on what might help you avoid having to use the ultimate sanction:

- Define what – in your world – qualifies as a “dispute” that will require some sort of formal intervention. If you can’t even agree on this definition, imagine what it’s going to be like if you ever have a dispute over anything *really* substantive.
- Who’s going to lead the resolution process in the team? What will you do if the person who’s normally responsible for leading the process appears to be the one causing the problem, or is the person directly on the receiving end of it?
- What will the person leading the resolution process have the power to do?
- Are there any circumstances under which you would call in somebody from outside the team to lead the resolution process?
 - What specific things would need to have happened in terms of attempting a resolution internally before this person was called in?
 - What would this person from outside the team have the power to do? Is it the same as an internal person leading the process or, if it differs, what does the difference look like and why does it exist?
- Think about the language that you are using when you are setting out your procedure. Not only does it need to be clear; it also needs to be neutral so people don’t feel like they are being attacked as a person, or that they have permission to launch a personal attack on anyone.
- Where there’s a lot of goodwill in the team, you *could* trust that everybody will remember what was agreed to, as well as the reasoning behind your decisions. This is going to be especially important if you are actually in a situation where you need to resolve a dispute – and that’s probably the time when most peoples’ memories and interpretations are going to become subjective.

What do you do, though, when you get somebody whose behaviours have triggered a dispute resolution process, but who refuses to engage with the process? Aside from making you wonder why they agreed to the process in the first place, you are probably also wondering about how many attempts it’s worth making to try to get some meaningful engagement. The theoretically “right” answer to this is the number of attempts you specified in your Standard Operating Procedures. If you decide you are going to deviate from that, you’d better have a good reason for it, because that’s automatically going to call into question just how willing you are to stick to other rules – and that might end up creating a whole new problem without having solved the first one.

I’ve seen the exit process followed quickly and slowly. My preference is always to get it done quickly, especially if the member being exited from the team isn’t going of their own free will. It’s still going to be an emotional time, even if the person being exited makes out they are going of their own choice, and it’s a really good thing for them. Whatever disruption the exit process causes is something that’s going to impact your project timeline, because you will need to reallocate tasks and may even need to re-scope the project. You might prefer to go slowly – that’s something you’ll need to justify according to your own circumstances at the time.

Advice

- The primary purpose of dispute resolution is **NOT** about punishment – what you really want to do is get to the root cause of a problem so you can work collaboratively to solve it and capture the important Learning Moment for the future. If it’s genuinely deserved, punishment should be your *last* resort.
- Focus your process on the sorts of actions you are willing to take if a dispute that needs formal resolution happens. This is more than just the actions and commitment you expect from the person who caused the problem. It’s also about the actions the rest of the team will take to collaborate with the member resolve the problem.

- The same principle applies if the problem originates outside your project team. Rather than simply blaming somebody else – which might be nice and convenient - think about how you might be able to collaborate with them to resolve the problem.
- Make sure your process is all clearly documented. You need everybody to understand exactly what they are signing up to.
- Get everybody in the team to sign – literally. This is an open sign of their commitment to the process, and their willingness to use it if it should become necessary.
- When you are discussing any dispute that's considered serious enough to invoke the formal resolution process, make sure you discuss the issues rather than attacking the person. All personal aggravation does is create a second problem without you solving the first one.
- It's tough, because your decisions are going to affect real people, and in ways you might not have intended when you were working your way through the problem solving and decision-making processes. This is especially true in the case of somebody who's going to be exited from the team. No matter what happened, everybody deserves to be treated with respect.
- Be prepared to apply the ultimate sanction and exit a non-performing and non-cooperative member from the team. You don't get any bonus points for carrying somebody who's not performing and who refuses to engage constructively with the dispute resolution process. The longer you allow them to remain, the more this affects the attitude and performance of everybody else in the team – and it may also impact on the team's relationships with external stakeholders.

Standing up and voicing out

There will be times that things happen which you aren't comfortable with, or that you don't understand. Maybe you feel a bit of peer pressure – whether or not it's real – to go along with what others are saying. What happens if you take the easy way out and go along with what everybody else *seems* to want – and what happens turns out to be wrong (or, at least, not the most appropriate choice that could have been made under the circumstances)? Whichever of these scenarios is true for you, chances are you aren't going to be feeling that good, because you could have done something about this if you only did one thing – stood up and voiced out your doubts.

Experience tells me there's a few common reasons why you might not want to do that:

- You might not be sure you can find the “right” words that will make it clear to the others what you think and why that's important to you. Maybe you think those are all the fancy words in the textbooks, because you're supposed to be using them
- The speed with which a decision needs to be made – or, at least, the *perceived* speed. Maybe you need a bit more time to process an idea, but you don't want to appear to hold the team up *just for you*.
- You trust the people who spoke up earlier know what they are talking about, because they *sound like* they do. After all, they wouldn't have spoken up so soon, or so strongly, if they weren't certain about what they were saying...
- You don't think you have as much experience as one or more of your fellow team members, or that your experience is as “relevant” as theirs. Relevance is definitely in the “subjective judgement” category, especially in the early stages of your team life and project work.
- What I call “The Dummy Factor” – you don't want to appear as a “dummy” to the others in the team if you voice out your questions or doubts, because you're convinced everybody else already knows the answers. Maybe they do; maybe they don't, and they're like you and not ready to admit that...
- Maybe you've had a bad experience speaking up before and you don't want a repeat of it.

No matter how many of these things are true for you, there's something else that's also true – nobody else is going to speak up for you. If a thought is important enough for you to think it, it's important enough for you to voice it out.

Advice

- If there's *one* thing that's going to have massive benefits for you, your team, and how your project turns out – more massive than just about anything else - that's working to create a team culture where *everybody can* voice out whatever they need to say without fear of negative judgement from any of the others. This culture is not something that happens by magic, and it's not something you can stop working on when you think you've created a culture that will “work.” The reality is that team culture is something that each of you will need to work on creating and maintaining every day between now and the end of the project.
- Never shut down anybody who's been brave enough to voice something out, for three reasons. One – you don't know how hard it might have been for them to do that, so respect their willingness to do it. Two – you might just be shutting down an amazing Learning Moment for the whole team. Three – depending on how you do it, you might have killed their willingness to voice out again in the future, and that could be as damaging for them as for the team.

- Wherever possible, give people time to reflect on what is being discussed and decided. Don't assume that everybody thinks at the same lightning speed that you do - because they don't. Not everybody will have your same expertise when it comes to a topic. Some may be working in a language that isn't their first language and moving back and forth between the common language in the team and their mother language.
- If there's something you aren't clear about, ask questions to get somebody to clarify it for you. Believe it or not, this is actually good for the person on the receiving end of the question as well, because it gives them another opportunity to clarify their own thinking.
- Quite simply, make it a rule that everybody in the team is expected to speak up and add their thinking to the collective discussion. Nobody's opinion is worth less than anybody else's.



In our house, even our cat is comfortable with standing up and voicing out if she's got an opinion we need to listen to. We've always treated her opinions as being equal with ours, and that's probably why she doesn't hold back when she has anything to say. The fact she's not the same as us has never stopped the three of us from being an awesome little team.

Chill out

Whether it's the end of the day, the end of the week, or some other time when you need a break - chill out and take some time away from whatever you are working on.

Advice

- Turn your device/s off or put them away where you can't be distracted by them.
- Sit and watch the clouds drift by - you've earned this chance to "power down" and refresh yourself.
- Just BE.



Feel free to reward yourself

The way the human brain seems to be wired, most of us respond to rewards. I'm not talking about something for nothing – what I mean is *something you value in exchange for work done*. Life would be simple if one reward fitted all circumstances, but you know that's not true. Some of us respond to extrinsic rewards – given by other people, while some of us respond to intrinsic rewards – things that we give ourselves. Just to make life interesting, some of us respond situationally, moving between wanting one or the other.

Let's complicate life a bit more by throwing in some other variables. Rewards on offer may not always match the rewards it's possible to get. What strongly motivates one person in a team may have little or no motivational value to their team-mates. The criteria we use to judge when we are eligible for a reward, and what level of reward – unless clearly spelled out – can be as variable as the people on your team. The reality is there's nothing to stop you giving yourself a reward any time you like, because the only person you need to justify it to is yourself. If anybody else thinks you rewarding yourself is unreasonable, there's nothing they can do to undo what has already been done. At most, their unhappiness might change how you go about rewarding yourself in the future.

If you have a big project on, it might come with a big reward at the end, but that can seem like forever in the future when you are right at the start. When you're putting your project plan together, it will fall into a series of discrete sections and tasks within those sections. The breaks between sections and tasks can serve as natural points where you could consider rewards for completion – for small ones – or progress for larger ones. If you want to reward performance or **ATTITUDE** at times that fall outside those where somebody has done something particularly wonderful, that's OK *providing* the reasons are made clear and the reward isn't out of proportion to what it's being given for.

Whether or not whole-team rewards will be shared equally. I know this probably sounds a bit odd, but I've known teams in the past where the rewards haven't been shared equally, for various reasons, or they've been shared in a way which made it impossible for some members to claim them. That creates a whole new problem that didn't need to be solved in the first place.

Something that's really worth thinking about here – although I'm sure *you* would never do it – is holding rewards back as some sort of punishment. This could happen if one had been promised in advance, but then some aspect of a person's performance was judged to fall short of the required standard. That standard might be connected with either the quantity or quality of their output, which is why setting objective performance criteria is so important at the start. If you leave that until other things start happening, it becomes more difficult to do because some people are going to feel the need to defend their performance against everybody else instead of trying to look objectively at the difference between expected and actual performance.

Then they start to get annoyed – you can put your own, blunter word or words in here to describe what happens – because they think they are being picked on, and that's not fair. Often, in my experience, that's because the signs have been there that performance is lacking and, instead of speaking up and trying to do something about it, anybody who did notice anything said and did nothing about it. The person who's not getting a reward they expected doesn't see why they should do anything for the team since the team didn't do anything for them, and there's all sorts of ways they can make life difficult so everybody else knows they aren't happy...

Advice

- In order to be able to reward performance, you need to have clear performance criteria from the start. If you don't have those, your team's chances of delivering what you are being asked for aren't that great.
- If you plan on rewarding **ATTITUDE**, be clear about what aspects could earn it, as well as what evidence would justify it. This also flows from the performance criteria you've already established.
- Whatever reward you are giving yourself has to be something you, or the team, can afford – there's no point in going into debt for something that is beyond your means at the time, because this turns what should be a happy event into a stressful one once you start having to work out how to pay for it.
- Any reward has to be proportionate to both the amount of effort invested and the significance of the output being rewarded. If you give yourself something big for achieving something small, what are you going to do when you achieve something big?
- Think about rewards like they're items on a menu at a restaurant. Why do they offer so many choices? You know it – because not everybody enjoys the same things, even though you're all enjoying the same restaurant experience. Rather than forcing people to accept a reward they don't personally put much value on, is it possible for them to choose from a range – and it doesn't have to be a big range – of options of approximately equal value and significance? If people feel like they're going to get something that they personally value, they're likely to put more effort into trying to earn it.
 - What might offend some people? The answer to this is the same thing that won't offend some other people. This is why it's important to know something about each other as humans so you don't inadvertently do something that upsets somebody else. Why is this important? Because, even though you might apologise for any offence caused, the apology may not be remembered as much as what caused the offence in the first place. Best to check before you go ahead finalising reward decisions.
- Not every single task needs to be rewarded on its own. You go down that path and you end up spending as much time rewarding yourself as you do in actually getting any substantive work done – which really defeats the whole purpose of having rewards in the first place.
- I'm all in favour of some sort of end-of-project celebration – after all, you've just achieved a significant milestone, both professionally and personally. You've earned the right to a good time – just remember to do it responsibly, because a reward you can't remember after the event isn't a good reward.

Section D: Looking back to see ahead

In which I talk about the importance of reflecting and projecting ahead...

Serendipity

This is a chapter that I didn't plan to write originally. In fact, I'm not sure I'd planned to ever write it, because it's a piece of ancient wisdom that just IS. It was only after reflecting overnight on a chance conversation with my DPP study buddy, Vicki-Maree, that the sense of including this hit me.

Sometimes on your project/team journey, people and circumstances just come together to create results that just feel so much better/more "right" than anything you could have created deliberately. Beautiful experiences. Unexpected friendships that will stay with you forever. You can't mandate for them in a set of Standard Operating Procedures. If you spend all your time concentrating on finding them, you will not experience them.

Serendipity comes from a place that's both outside and inside of you. It will find you when you least expect it because the time is right. Just let it happen in its own way. Be respectful enough to simply enjoy the moment in peace.



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Several different weather conditions all needed to happen at the same time to create the stunning rainbow in this rural Otago scene. On top of them, Vicki-Maree had to be in just the right place at the right time; and commit to stopping long enough to capture the shot. A couple of minutes either side of this moment and commitment and this beautiful image would not have existed.

It's like that with collaborative projects as well. You might not have set out on your journey with the intention of finding a rainbow, but don't close your eyes to the possibility of finding one...

Remembering (and valuing) my own journey

I was born to do what I'm doing now with collaborative learning, but I didn't know that until I was 38 years old; and had lived through the Applied Management course experience as a Li/MiT myself. Looking back, both then and now, everything I experienced working in an office for 18 months, and then in manufacturing, mostly on the factory floor, for 16 years taught me so much about how to lead and manage people – and how *not* to do it. What I lacked, before I went back to formal learning in my mid-30s, were the ideas and the language necessary to develop a leadership and management style of my own that would feel “right” and deliver results. I felt like I needed to evolve, and the formal learning process was going to be part of doing that.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Tim Hare, the lecturer for 236 Applied Management in Semester Two, 1998 at Central Institute of Technology, for allowing us as Li/MiTs to turn what could have been a dull and theoretical course into something intensely practical and “real.” He expected a lot more than many of us believed – at the start – that we were capable of; and was quite unapologetic about pushing us to be the best we could be. He supported us more than many of us realised at the time – if we were willing to ask for it. It was through his pushing and supporting that I “discovered” something that has been a passion of mine to this day – collaborative Project-Based Learning and collaborative assessment.

Together Everyone Achieves More is an old adage that has a lot of truth to it – providing participants don't go thinking that effective teamwork is easy.

Honestly, some of my previous experiences, both as a Li/MiT and as a Course Facilitator, have been downright painful. I've dealt with people right on the edge of what they can deal with both personally and professionally, as well as some of the people who've had a part in pushing them there. There have been people who've wanted to damage me and, in one particular case, to destroy me. Some people have understood - even though it might have taken a while – why I operate the way I do, while others just haven't “got me” at all.

I look back at the commitment I've made to every Li/MiT that goes far beyond what any of my contracts called for. Being available by email or phone (including home and mobile numbers) from breakfast time through to late evening five days a week and lunch time to late evening on Sundays – originally it was breakfast time to late evening seven days a week, but I listened – just a bit – to people who advised me to scale that back so I could have a life that didn't include work seemingly 24/7. Why make a commitment that goes outside – way outside – traditional “office hours”, and includes out-of-office contact details, when all my colleagues were still holding rigidly to the traditional model?

Simple: collaborative Project-Based Learning usually means most of the project work is being done outside the scheduled training sessions (“classes” if you insist on calling them that) – and that's when most of the questions and problems arise. Being able to get some quick advice or assistance means problems can be resolved before they become “bigger than Ben Hur” and start affecting other areas of a Li/MiT's life Experience tells me there are only three problems I can't have at least partially resolved in ten minutes or less on the phone or in a single email:

- Childbirth – *because I don't “do” blood. Hang up, dial 111 and ask for an ambulance.*
- Death – *if you're dead, it's too late to call me because it's one of the few outcomes I don't have the ability to change.*

- Being abducted by little green men in a spaceship – *I'm not aware of this ever happening on one of my courses, so I'm not sure how I would handle it...*

Not everybody that could have done took advantage of the time they were offered, but those who did seemed to be more committed to their projects, and to their own learning and development, generally producing better academic and deeper personal learning.

Would I make a commitment like this again? Yes, without hesitation, although with more structure to the out-of-traditional-hours availability than in the past – there's no point in me burning *myself* out to try to lessen the possibility of *other people* burning out. There has to be a realistic line between my passion for guiding people on their collaborative journey, treating collaborative projects as a job of work rather than “just another classroom subject”, and supporting Li/MiTs to develop a self-managing ethic. Having said that, do I regret the level of investment I've had in the past in collaborative projects and the Li/MiTs involved in them? Not for a minute.

In case you think my story is all doom, gloom and disaster, it's far from that. The painful moments stand out because of the sometimes intense nature of the pain, not because of their number. There have been so many positive moments along the way – events that I have been PRIVILEGED to be a part of (the fact that somebody paid me for this is almost an afterthought). People doing things they once thought were impossible for them – and that's only putting the *hard* skills into practice. People delivering results for Project Sponsors that went far beyond what could reasonably have been expected – and way beyond what their signed contracts committed them to. Most importantly – in my view - people who learned what it meant to be who they are at a level deeper than they ever expected, and which fundamentally changed who they thought they could be in the future.

No matter where I end up in my future, I don't stand on the shoulders of these people who have played such important parts in my own life. I stand alongside them because they are me and I am them. I cannot be who I am today without each one of them – “good”, “bad”, and “ugly.” I don't know with absolute clarity where I'm going to end up, but I do know I'll never forget where I came from, and that I will always value my evolutionary journey as an educator at least as much as the destination.



To me, this image of a rose in our back garden sums up everything I think I've learned about collaborative project work and collaborative assessment – so far... The black background represents VUCA – the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity of the environment in which the team is being put together, and the project is being conceived and executed. No matter how much I think I already know, there are always new challenges – or new versions of old ones that can come from out of the shadows and demand attention. The bloom itself is the thing of value that has emerged from the VUCA gloom of what could go wrong –reaching towards the light of what can go right, adapting to the conditions around it, but always programmed to be the best version of itself. Yes, there are still days when the blackness is strong, and growing conditions not ideal, but the bloom doesn't stop being what it's meant to be. There's no point in its growth cycle where it's totally perfect – everyone will judge it differently. What's important is that each bloom has been there and been counted and appreciated for what it contributed to the overall show put on by the whole bush..

Concluding thoughts

What you've read is very different to what I originally set out to produce. That book's still there in my imagination; and will come to life when the time is right for it.

I've done a lot of talking to myself while recording these briefings because I wanted to capture what I think are the most valuable pieces of advice I've shared with project teams over the last 20-plus years at the start of their team life and the early stages of their projects. There's a whole different book about the journey beyond these briefings, and that's one of the main foundations for my overall Doctor of Professional Practice portfolio of projects.

Some people might see a project like this as vanity. Having talked to a number of people who've actually written books, or parts in other people's books, I will admit there is *an element* of vanity here, even though it's not my primary motivator. I see these briefings as primarily a *legacy* project. If anything happens to me and I'm unable to carry on my work as an educator and trainer, I will have left behind something that has value for everyone involved in collaborative projects, whether they be Li/MiTs or Course Facilitators involved in formal learning, or people doing projects as part of a job or a community/voluntary organisation they belong to.

I don't pretend to have all the answers, despite all the experiences I've had over the years facilitating collaborative projects. All I can say is that the advice at the end of each briefing is battle-tested. Even if you take only *one* thing (although I hope you will take more) that changes your thinking or behaviour from all these briefings, I'm happy.

Wherever your project life takes you, **go well and be awesome.**



Having been at various times a subordinate, manager, leader, Li/MiT, and Course Facilitator, I see the world of collaborative projects through multiple lenses. I know their challenges, their failures and their successes.

Each lens brings out different details, and the choice of lens determines what results can be achieved. Learning the theory of their use has taught me what is possible. It is only through being brave enough to try different lenses and settings in practice that I am developing my photographic instinct. The same is true of my experiences working with collaborative project teams.

For all the tough moments, looking back now I wouldn't have missed my journey for anything. While I have discovered much about the world and how it works, and about myself and my place in it, I have learned I still have much to learn.



Here's wishing you sunshine wherever you go and whatever you do. You deserve it. Share it around – a world of sunshine is a world of positive possibilities.