



# Getting things done through others: a training dilemma

By Dr Penny Pullan

Think of a very successful project manager. Pick someone who is known for their handling of tricky projects and for always delivering despite complex stakeholder relationships.

Now imagine the same project manager, with just one skill taken away: their ability to get things done through others, even when they lack line management authority. They can keep all their project management knowledge and all their other skills apart from this one. How will this change their results?

My prediction is that their results will worsen dramatically. Their productivity will fall as they have to take on more of the work of the project themselves. Their frustration levels will rise as they become overloaded.

Stakeholders will no longer be involved in the project as deeply as before. The project manager may feel as if their job is impossible.

His or her boss will no longer see them the consummate professional and is likely to begin to worry about delivery and whether they should have picked someone else instead.

This scenario sounds awful doesn't it? It is. I know, because I've been there. It was many years ago, when I was a new project leader. After delivering several small projects, I was given my big chance to take on a major project. With the benefit of many years of hindsight, I wonder if it was a poisoned chalice? The project in question was already late, hadn't delivered anything and I was the third project manager. In short, it was failing.

## Poisonous project

Those of you who are more experienced than I was then will see many danger signals, but for me, it was my first big chance. I relished the opportunity to deliver something big. The project team's motivation was rock bottom after all the delay, changes in project manager and lack of delivery, and within a couple of weeks starting, all of the rest of the team had resigned. All of a sudden, I was both project manager *and* project team!

There was so much work to do that I stopped communicating with stakeholders, bar sending out hundreds of e-mails each day, and put my head down to get everything done. Needless to say, overload followed. The project delivered a good product just before the deadline, but it wasn't fun.

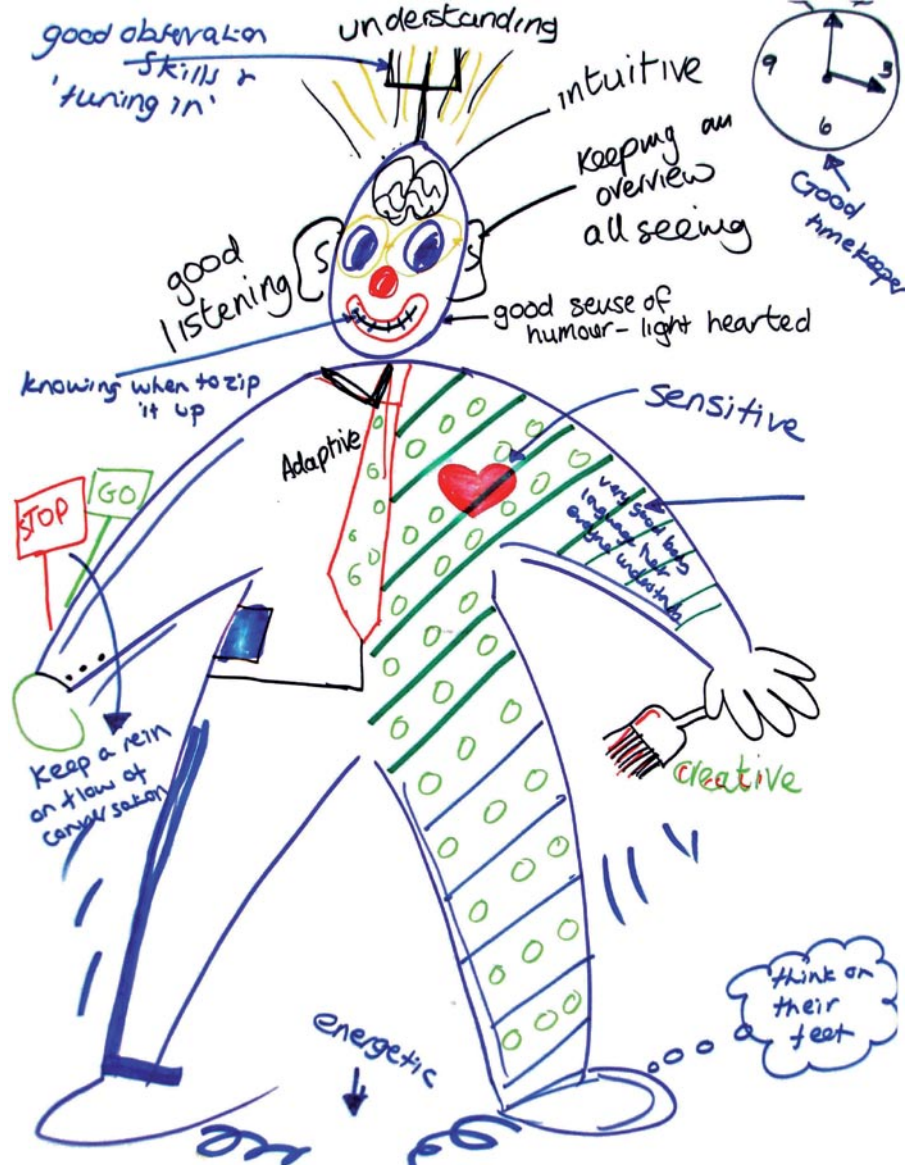
I had put the *doing* of the project work (by me as it turns out) above the need to influence others to get things done.

A few years after this poisonous project, the lessons I'd learned so painfully about getting things done through others were bearing fruit. By this time, I was programme manager for a global endeavour involving the United Nations, government ministers and directors of multinational companies as key stakeholders.

As before, when I joined, the programme was running late and hadn't yet delivered. This time, within six months, we'd delivered the key product. Did I say that only 50% of my time was allocated to this global programme? What a difference!

So what was it that made the difference? By then, I knew how to get things done through others, even those who were much more senior than me and in different organisations and even based on different continents. My transformation had begun by learning lessons from the overload and frustration of my earlier project. I'd modelled what I saw the very best project managers doing and found what worked. I was lucky enough to have a coach and mentor and to develop very strong facilitation skills over several years at Mars Inc.

In this training issue of *Project Manager Today*, a question arises: Can we develop this ability to get things done through others without line management authority *without* spending years and years in the process? Can we develop this crucial skill more quickly? If so, how?



**Facilitation the key?**

This question is becoming more urgent as organizations realise that a pass in PRINCE2 or another project management theory course will not develop the soft skills that make the difference. But if the standard project management courses today won't do it, is there anything that could? If so what might this be? What would it look like?

Since 2008, I have pioneered a course that develops facilitation skills in project managers. What do I mean by facilitation skills? These are the skills that will enable project managers to get a group to do things and to reach consensus, to agree on outcomes and deliver to them.

These skills are powerful ways of both engaging stakeholders and influencing them without line management authority. The course is very different from the norm and has been well received by those who have taken it. The skills have been applied as far afield as delivering project risk workshops in Scotland to responding to the Haiti emergency relief on the ground earlier this year.

Jon Bugge, a project manager with *Save the Children*, says that: 'I've gone from feeling that meetings were a necessary evil (slightly out of control) to having a stepping stone with energy that can be channelled.'

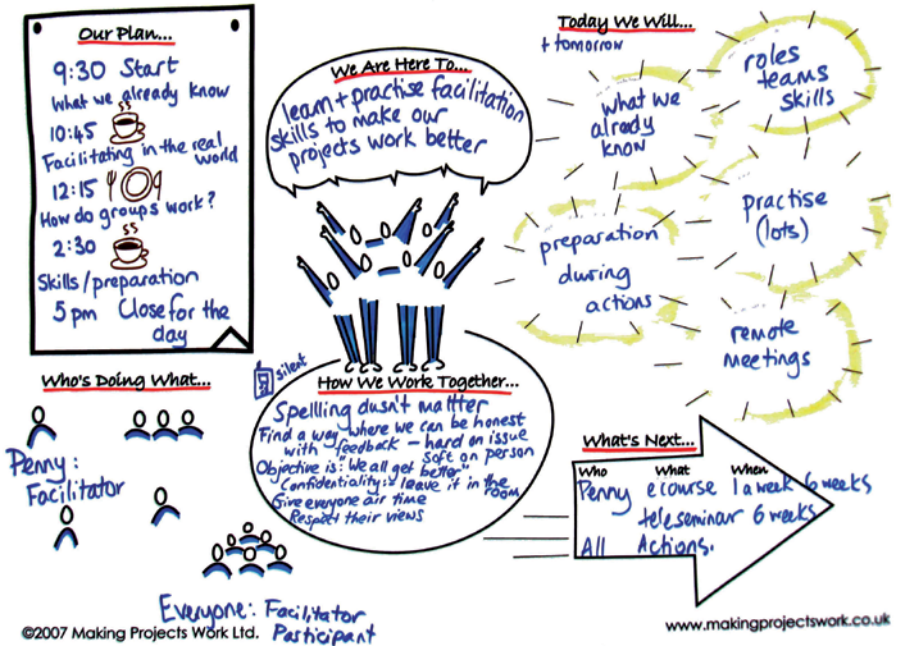
So in developing the course what are the key things that we've learned that you can take away and apply elsewhere to develop soft skills for project managers? My key tips are:

**Keep it real**

We concentrate on experiential learning. This means that participants experience using the skills and seeing others use them. The exercises are real. That means no role-play and no made-up case studies that people can hide behind. They need to be themselves as that's who they are back at work when they'll need to use the skills. We don't use any PowerPoint slides at all.

**Practise, practise, practise**

Delegates need to practise their new skills and receive feedback from everyone, starting with themselves. This means that the group become much more aware of what is happening and



how everything that they do influences the outcomes of each exercise. I've also noticed that without the usual case study, participants get to deal with some of the uncertainty and ambiguity that is inherent in today's projects.

**Develop a practical understanding of relevant theory**

While some theory is helpful, it's often presented over many slides. We've found that bite sized chunks of useful models and theory are helpful for a group, when they're delivered immediately before they're going to try out an exercise where the theory can be applied.

**Keep their development going for months, not just days**

When people return to the workplace after courses, they have so much to catch up on. Hundreds of e-mails are the norm! Often, they have little chance to put their newly developed techniques into practice as the need to deal with the backlog kicks in. Often new skills are slower at the start and can remain unused.

What we find works best is that the workshop days are just part of the whole experience, which starts beforehand as people

work out which aspects of their work they'd like to cover. On their return to work, they're paired up with an accountability partner from the course to help them apply their actions. Each week, one of the topics is revisited with a short article and, after six weeks, the whole course meet up virtually by tele-seminar to report back, review and ask questions.

Rather than use slides, we capture the words and examples people talk about by writing them down and adding live graphics during the two days. All of these are photographed and processed into a unique workbook for each participant, which they receive two weeks after the course. This helps to keep the learning alive, as visual memory is strong and brings back all thoughts.

The leader needs to speak 'Project': 'Soft skills' trainers often talk in a completely different language from project people. Psycho-babble doesn't work with project managers, who are practical people, keen to get things done. To develop soft skills in project managers, we've found that using experienced project people as facilitators has worked better than general soft-skills trainers.

So can soft skills be developed through training courses rather than years of project experience?

I would say a qualified 'Yes' if the course is experiential, with lots of practice, has enough theory appropriately presented, that the development lasts longer than the course itself and that the course facilitators are experienced in the world of projects and able to speak in the language that project people understand.

*Dr Penny Pullan is a director of Making Projects Work Ltd. To receive her report '12 1/2 ways to make your project meetings work for you', sign up at www.making-projectswork.co.uk for your own copy. To find out more about the facilitation class, call Penny at 01509 821691 or contact Penny@makingprojectswork.co.uk.*

