

Simon Harris on aspects of PM . . .

On getting fired and moving on . . .



Last month this magazine celebrated its 20th anniversary and it set me wondering, especially in the present economic climate, about how many times I have been fired during the time that *Project Manager Today* has been reflecting advancements in PM!

I don't know what your score is but mine might be three times so far.

Actually, 'Fired' is the wrong word. The right sentiment is 'been moved-on'. By the time I started to write this, I had revised the 'three' upward many times.

What I've learned is that 'getting moved on' is always uncomfortable, happens more often than voluntarily deciding to move on, and is always, ultimately advancement.

The first that comes to mind is 1990 when the London Stock Exchange shed 1,000 people in what was probably the third round of redundancies in nine months. I was a Unix techie and the elected 'Staff Representative' for several departments. I'd been there 11 years.

Looking forward at that time was full of uncertainty and thus scary. Looking back, I can see that it was full of opportunity. The 'euphemism' of 'released to pursue other opportunities' is actually true!

Their severance process was protracted, while my role as staff rep required stressful debate with the personnel function (for whom I was also the elected rep!) on behalf of my divisional director, his management team, their secretaries and every other grade in between that was within the corporate hierarchy.

Overnight my role moved on from 99% technical team leader to 80% councillor and negotiator. It moved on three months later to 100% job seeker! Within some months, as an IT contractor, I had doubled my take-home pay!!

At the time I didn't know that what I had learned from the turmoil was invaluable.

Learning

Gaining experience is a journey. I use two ways of looking at how I can learn from experience. One is inspired by David Kolb's cycle of 'Concrete Experience when followed by Reflective Observation leads to Abstract Conceptualisation which when used for Active Experimentation leads to Concrete Experience' and so the cycle repeats. The second is: 'Unconscious incompetence before conscious incompetence, before conscious competence before unconscious competence'. In 1990 'they' moved me from unconsciously incompetent to consciously incompetent.

The importance of plans

Twenty (err . . . 30) years ago it was being drummed into me that I had to have a full, deterministic plan at the start of every project.

Often I was bemused by what was asked of me: 'but you don't really know what you want, I don't know all the technical issues to create it', or 'but we know this backwards why do you want to waste my energy on drawing a Gantt chart?' The latter answer was 'the departmental Quality Management System says so'.

Unwritten plans

Imagine a troubled corner of a global organisation embracing all on-going projects and calling them 'The Transformation Programme'.

Original budget holders and project managers have zero interest in being 'assimilated'. Zero progress to date means the head of the PMO has recently become conscious of their incompetence: I took the offered contract assignment to strengthen this inexperienced regional programme office.

At the end of the first week I was asked: 'Have you got a plan?' I said 'No'. The same thing happened in weeks 2, 3 & 4 at which point the response was: 'Well I think you should look for a new opportunity then'.

Perhaps I should have answered differently. The first week I should have said: 'Yes, my plan is to go see the project managers and hear what they say'. Then week two: 'Yes, I'm going to tell London that monthly reports are a fairy tale and we will take a month's reporting holiday in order to create a true picture'. In week three: 'Yes, I've advised the director that change will generate complaints from sponsors - she is ready to rebut them and I have all the current PMs taking half an hour for lunch on Fridays - *to sit together!*'. Then in week four: 'The PMs are realising they are working on duplicate and contradictory initiatives! Let's give them a week and then invite the sponsors around the table?'

I think, in hindsight, this was unconscious competence that needed to be expressed 'out loud' to make my consciously incompetent employer have confidence. Instead they fired me and I took the 'learned lesson' away with me, even though it took some years to see its value.

Now

This week I parted company with a partnership I had recently jointly founded. It hasn't quite got off the ground yet, but it will. We parted amicably, without great drama, and I expect we will cooperate in the future (editor's note: cooperation is now in hand). Our goals aligned, but not our approach, our view of formality, or of what is crucial.

When we started we could not predict how personalities would mesh. Signing the partnership papers was scary and full of uncertainty. I realize now that at some point in the last 30 years I have learned 'go for it: you cannot think out everything, but you can add reactive controls to proactive planning'.

The final discussion revolved around balancing: 'do our differences make the partnership stronger and more resilient, or less fun to work within?' This wasn't scary, but it was full of 'unknowable-ness'!

Ultimately we can't know what lies in that 'other future' - that is the one we didn't select.

Only sitting here writing this, do I wonder if I was unconsciously competent when faced with the decision to say: 'Let's stop now. I'll pay for x you pay for y. I own this, you own that. OK?'

Different stories but a common theme

We all have different experiences throughout life. Change always looks scary when it approaches; it feels worse for those with little experience of change - ie, non-project staff!

Everyone, at some point in their lives will benefit from being 'moved-on', but typically they will not do so voluntarily. Once in motion we are all marvellously able to invent great solutions that would never emerge if motion had not been forced upon us.

And finally . . .

The more times you see change, ie, get fired or get 'move on', the more you appreciate that all good, all advancement, all progress - comes from a change. And the moral of the story is that to deliver a project-based change requires that you move the people on. Often the best way is to remove the 'choice to move' while providing the means to choose where they 'move to'.

About the Author

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control competencies. Simon's approach is to demystify project management. PM's place is as a normal part of any manager's abilities (like driving a car). Simon provides the PM specialists with industrial strength tools and insights into 'common sense' approaches to project management. See more at www.Logicalmodel.net. Simon can be contacted via 0845 2 57 57 07 or Simon@LogicalModel.Net

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