

The importance of communication adaptability and collaboration in managing the human behaviour and team dynamics of projects

Natasha Hoppner

*School of Project Management, Bond University,
Gold Coast, Australia*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research paper is to investigate correlations between communication style and process, and the efficacy of project managers with respect to managing their stakeholders.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Six practicing project management professionals were interviewed to ascertain their experiences of using communication as a people management tool in developing a collaborative project team environment. This qualitative data was compared to a body of reviewed literature to discern the implications of communication and collaboration on the efficacy of project managers.

Findings – This paper finds that the explicit and tacit communication competencies of project managers have a direct impact on how effectively a project manager can influence the human behaviour and team dynamics among the various project stakeholders; which subsequently holds implications for project success overall.

Research implications/limitations - This project contributes to this greater body of knowledge by isolating adaptability and collaboration as determinants of successful person-to-person communication executed by project managers. However, this research is not necessarily representative of the project management constituency and additional research is required in order to investigate and validate these findings further.

Originality/value – This research isolated adaptability and collaboration as determinants of project manager efficacy when managing stakeholders.

Keywords – Adaptive communication, managing human behaviour, navigating team dynamics, collaborative project management

Paper type – Research Paper

1. Introduction

According to the Project Management Institute (2013), 15.7 million new project management roles will be created globally in the decade between 2010 and 2020. Further, this influx of job growth will be accompanied by a significant surge in the economic footprint of the project management profession (Project Management Institute, 2013). As the industry grows, and becomes increasingly consequential to the planning, execution and maintenance of major

initiatives and organisations, both researchers and practitioners have begun investing more time and resources into identifying the causes of project failure and the primary factors that lead to project success (Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan, 2010). One such factor that has been identified so far is: communication.

It is widely acknowledged throughout the project management discipline that communication among members of a team is essential to the ongoing functioning, perseverance and overall success of that team (Tiferes & Bisantz, 2018; Beck & Keyton, 2013; Keyton, Beck, & Asbury, 2010; Deguire, 2013). Although, in spite of the increasing importance and effort invested into developing their communication skills, many project managers continue to struggle, unable to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively and ultimately unable manage meaningful relationships with all levels of stakeholders (Deguire, 2013; Alderton, 2014; Fisher, 2011). Further, the body of literature which pertains to communication and collaboration determinant of project manager efficacy and ultimately project success, is relatively limited compared to the literature which discusses the broader concept of 'emotional intelligence' as the primary determinant.

The purpose of this research project is to determine how communication and interpersonal behaviours such as collaboration manifest in a project team environment, and how these phenomena impact the efficacy of a project manager when they are engaged in dialogues and multilogues with different project stakeholders.

2. Literature Review

Given that the history of understanding pertaining to both communication and 'emotional intelligence' (as psychology) extends back to the earliest signs of life, it is not within the scope of this research paper to cover the extensive literature on these two issues. Rather, the literature evaluated will only pertain to communication and emotional intelligence as it related to the project management discipline.

Pertinent literature was procured from personal library of printed project management literature, as well as from a diversity of online sources including ProQuest Central, ScienceDirect, Wiley and SAGE databases.

In the instance of procuring literature from an online database, search events consisted of the base term 'communication' combined with additional, search refining keywords including: 'project management', 'project managers', 'project success', 'adaptability', 'collaboration', 'team dynamics', 'stakeholder management', 'behaviour', 'emotional intelligence', 'leadership', 'strategy' and 'research'. Searches were also subsequently refined by restricting the publication date to the time period pf 1995 to 2019.

Articles were then assessed for inclusion or exclusion in the review according to their relevance relative to their publication date, and their correspondence to other sources; specifically,

whether the article endorsed or contradicted assertions made by other authors, whether the article offered supplementary information, and/or whether the article offered a unique or multidisciplinary perspective on the correlation between communication and project management. The procurement and assessment process of pertinent literature yielded 80 articles for inclusion in this research paper.

The concept of 'emotional intelligence' overwhelmingly dominates the existing literature on the relationship between a project manager's 'soft' competencies, interpersonal dynamics and project success; further, emotional intelligence is regularly refined into other areas of emotional traits and behaviours such as conflict management, trust and loyalty building, overall leadership qualities and communication efficacy (Chen & Lin, 2018; Lai, Hsu, & Li, 2018; Zhang, Cao, & Wang, 2018; Obradovic, Jovanovic, Petrovic, Mihic, & Mitrovic, 2013; Clarke, Projects are Emotional: How project managers' emotional awareness can influence decisions and behaviours in projects, 2010).

2.1 Conceptualising Project Management

The discipline of project management, that is the academically acknowledged study and practice of, has been "in vogue" since the late 1980s/early 1990s – prompting the publication of a spectrum of literature, research and debate concerning its construct and application across all industries in society (Garel, 2013; Brensen, 2016; Whitty & Schulz, 2007; Burke, 2010). In this time the notion of project management has evolved significantly, transcending its initial identity as a collection of technical tools to encompass individual technical and socio-emotional competencies and ultimately earn a place in management sciences as a leadership style, organizational mode and – more generally – as a "system of anticipating and rationalizing temporary collective initiatives" (Garel, 2013, p. 663; Soderlund, 2004; Burke, 2010). The theoretical, and increasingly practical, concentration of the project management discipline is consequently no longer the tangible tools and techniques, but rather the person behind them – the project manager.

In defining the role of the project manager, Burke (2010) identifies more 'soft' or human skills than 'hard' or technical skills in his list of desirable attributes; further, those attributes that would traditionally be considered 'hard' do not specifically stipulate technical competencies, but rather the ability to execute certain activities or deliverables (Burke, 2010). Burke's concentration on soft skills is representative of a shift in project management thought school and literature, away from tools and techniques and toward interpersonal competencies as indicators of project management success (Turner, Muller, & Dulewicz, 2009; Rezvani, Khosravi, & Ashkanasy, Examining the interdependencies among emotional intelligence, trust, and performance in infrastructure projects: A multilevel study, 2018; Wu, Liu, Zhao, & Zuo, 2017; Um & Kim, 2018; Clarke, Projects are Emotional: How project managers' emotional awareness can influence decisions and behaviours in projects, 2010). It is this conceptualisation of project management as part of the management sciences, as a leadership

style and organizational mode, that this research is interested in; while also reflecting on what competencies are required by a project manager to be effective when managing the interpersonal aspects of a project.

Identifying and codifying which qualities of a project manager determine project success has been debated throughout the history of project management literature. Academics such as Bredillet, Tywoniak, & Dwivedula (2015), Montequin, Nieto, Ortego, & Villanueva (2015) and Meng & Boyd (2017) argue that the technical and managerial competencies of project managers are the quintessence of project success. In this way, it is what the project manager does that is most important to whether a project is successful or not. Conversely, more contemporary scholars such as Obradovic, Jovanovic, Petrovic, Mihic, & Mitrovic (2013), Rezvani et al. (2016) and Yu, Vaagaasar, Muller, Wang, & Zhu (2018) argue that it is the emotional intelligence and personal competencies relative to their stakeholders – i.e. how a project manager delivers a project within and external to their team – which enables project success.

2.2 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is becoming an increasingly popular focus of project management researchers and practitioners, as the industry ventures beyond their technical tools and processes to find other areas of projects where they can minimise risk and optimise results (Rezvani, Khosravi, & Ashkanasy, Examining the interdependencies among emotional intelligence, trust, and performance in infrastructure projects: A multilevel study, 2018; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; El-Sabaa, 2001; Cooke-Davies, 2002). However, unlike the technicalities of projects which can be empirically measured and quantitatively studied, emotional intelligence is a fluid and circumstantial competence and consequently challenging to define, quantify and build arguments around in any indisputable way.

Hochschild's (1983) seminal piece recognizing the commodification of emotions as integral to modern employment relationships instigated the formation of a research discipline to explore the role that emotion plays in influencing employee behaviours and, such is the focus of this research project, occupational outputs/outcomes (Hochschild, 1983; Clarke, Projects are Emotional: How project managers' emotional awareness can influence decisions and behaviours in projects, 2010). There are also a number of studies which directly correlate the emotional state of employees to their overall work performance (Henderson, Stackman, & Lindekilde, 2018; Clarke, The impact of a training programme designed to target the emotional intelligence abilities of project managers, 2010; Pryke, Lunic, & Badi, 2015). The integration of emotional intelligence into the project management discipline is consequently a phenomenon which cannot be ignored when evaluating the human skills of a project manager.

Mayer & Salovey (1997) define emotional intelligence as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional

meanings, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote both better emotion and thought” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The broad nature of this definition, however, lead some academics such as Ashkanasy & Daus (2005) and Goleman (2000) to relegate Mayer & Salovey’s definition to existing as only one ‘stream’ of a larger body of emotional intelligence definitions and understandings – which included personality types and behavioural traits not directly related to emotional intelligence, such as trust, leadership and social responsibility. The concept fo emotional intelligence has subqently become fragmented to improve its aplicability to specific competencies, skills and personality nuances depending on the discipline or industry in focus.

In the context of projects, researchers and practitioners alike are acknowledging the criticality of a project manager’s emotional intelligence when planning and delivering projects. Mazur, Pisarski, Chang & Ashkanasy (2014) argue that this correlation is particulrly evident relative to project complexity, whereby more complex projects ultimately demand greater competencies in and more nuanced displays of emotional intelligence. The perpetuative relationship between project complexity and the impact of a project manager’s emotional intelligence has been supported by a number of other researchers (Dvir, Ben-David, Sadeh, & Shenhar, 2006; Sauser, Reilly, & A, 2009; Rezvani, Khosravi, & Ashkanasy, Examining the interdependencies among emotional intelligence, trust, and performance in infrastructure projects: A multilevel study, 2018). The literature shows that researchers and practitioners have determined that emotional intelligence is the primary facilitator of all actions and behaviours exhibited by a project manager that ultimately leads to a project’s success or failure.

2.3 Nature versus Nurture

The body of works produced by project management researchers and practitioners alike has as many incongruences as analogies in their research results and arguments as to the industry implications of emotional intelligence; particularly with respect to ‘nature versus nurture’ arguments pertaining to emotional intelligence competence building (Akdemir, 2014; Meng & Boyd, 2017; Bredillet, Tywoniak, & Dwivedula, 2015; Loufrani-Fedida & Missonier, 2015; Andersen, 2016; Savelsbergh, Havermans, & Storm, 2016; Ramazani & Jergeas, 2015; Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan, 2010).

Phaneuf, Boudrias, Rousseau, & Brunelle (2016) argue that emotional intelligence and communication skills are intrinsically linked to a project manager’s ‘activated’ and ‘latent’ personality traits, and thus the individual is limited in the degree to which they can challenge and develop those intrinsic skills. Similarly, Muller & Turner (2010) argue that the emotional intelligence competencies of a project manager are “the idiosyncratic combination of behavioural, temperamental, emotional and mental attributes” which culminate together into a particular management profile and leadership style (Muller & Turner, 2010). This does not necessarily suggest that ‘nurture’ or improvement through education is not possible, but

rather than the human skills of a project manager are inherent to the person's nature; which is so complex and experiential, that it is often difficult to change. Similarly, Gilchrist, Burton-Jones & Green (2018) develop this argument further to assert that competencies are symptomatic of the greater issue of social alignment and misalignment, whereby stakeholders are either committed to the project outcomes and the means of achieving them or not according to their personal attitudes and biases. In attempting to achieve social alignment, the project manager's communication competencies are only effective in so much as they are received by the stakeholder; alignment must be a compromise of nature and nurture on behalf of both the project manager and stakeholder.

Conversely, Ramazani & Jergeas (2015) and Winter, Smith, Morris & Cicmil (2006) argue that emotional intelligence and 'human skills' such as communication can be developed through non-traditional training and education methods that look beyond the "delivery of standard package solutions and technique-oriented pedagogy" (Ramazani & Jergeas, 2015, p. 51). Educational institutions, according to academics, should consider experiential learning, with focuses on: developing critical thinking for managing project complexity, developing softer parameters of managing projects so as to incorporate interpersonal and communication skills as opposed to just technical skills, and preparing project managers to be engaged with the context of real life projects (Ramazani & Jergeas, 2015; Winter, Smith, Morris, & Cicmil, 2006; Clarke, The impact of a training programme designed to target the emotional intelligence abilities of project managers, 2010; Winter & Thomas, 2004). Should these considerations be introduced to tertiary education and industry training project management programs, it is said that project managers can develop the human skills necessary to ensure project success.

2.4 Communication

An equally prominent concept in the body of project management literature, but one which is often subjugated as a by-product of emotional intelligence, is that of communication. Burke (2010) estimates that project managers and project team members spend approximately 90% of their productive time "engaged in some form of communication, be it; meetings, writing emails, reading reports, or talking with project stakeholders" (Burke, 2010, p. 280). This statistic is supported by Rajkumar (2010) and Deguire (2013, p. 1) who also affirm that project managers spend "an inordinate amount of time communicating (with the project team, stakeholders, customers, and sponsors)."

Though, despite this commitment of time, many projects fail because of the project manager's inattention to or misunderstanding of the available methods of communication and communication best practices. This is confirmed by Alderton (2014), whose research shows that for every US\$1 billion spent on projects internationally, US\$75 million is at risk of 'waste' or 'non-delivery' due to ineffective or the absence of communication. These risks are predominantly manifest as unintended change and un-controlled change impacts in the project induced by deficient communication and, subsequently, mismanagement of

stakeholder expectations and their integration into the project (Butt, Naaranoja, & Savolainen, 2016; Mok, Shen, & Yang, 2015; Zhao, Lu, Zuo, & Zillante, 2010; Alderton, 2014).

Cheung, You & Lam (2013) define communication as the reciprocal process of exchanging information between sender(s) and receiver(s) using mutually-accepted methods or media. As can be imagined, the ambiguity of this definition – and many other definitions in the academic sphere around communication – leads to yawning disparities in the theoretical understanding and practical application of ‘communication’. Some of these inconsistencies include the implications of body language, the incorporation of new-technology as a primary communication media, and inclusive or exclusive of personal communications in the professional environment, for example.

In the context of this research paper, and for the greater context of communication in project management, ‘communication’ will be defined as the interpersonal interactions between project team members (one to one, or one to many) to achieve project objectives, and the means through which they conduct this interaction (Wu, Liu, Zhao, & Zuo, 2017; Orlikowski & Yates, 12994; Tai, Wang, & Anumba, 2009). This definition includes both personal and professional communication channels. The absence of personal communication channels neglects the need for project managers to build interpersonal relationships in order to achieve the ‘emotionally intelligent’ environment required to develop sustainable, robust teamwork and collaboration (Butt, Naaranoja, & Savolainen, 2016; Ramsing, 1996; Kerzner, 2009; Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2005).

It is also important that this definition be inclusive of non-verbal modes of communication, specifically behavioural traits which some argue are equally if not more important to the management of team dynamics than the verbal communication of project managers (Fisher, 2011; Kets De Vries, 2001; Thamhain, 2004; Rosenau, 1998). These non-verbal ‘communication behaviours’ comprise attitude and behavioural traits such as respect, empathy, knowledge and understanding of different cultures, being able to see issues from other perspectives, and an affinity for recognizing and acknowledging the valuable contributions of others (Fisher, 2011; Kets De Vries, 2001; Thamhain, 2004; Rosenau, 1998). Ultimately, it is the advanced culmination of explicit, technical communication delivery and tacit, interpersonal communication behaviour that differentiates a good project manager from one which is able to effectively manipulate the human behaviour and team dynamics of a project.

2.5 Collaboration and Conflict

Even more understated throughout the literature are the inferences of collaboration, which is essentially the culmination of emotional intelligence and communication. Collaboration and conflict, or the absence of collaboration, are important considerations for project managers as

they are the tangible, experiential manifestations of their emotional intelligence and communication in the project team and among project stakeholders.

Academics such as Gransberg, Dillon, Reynolds & Boyd (1999) and Vaaland (2004) argue that collaboration is the key factor that contributes to the success or failure of a project. This arguably neglects the fundamentality of the contributing factors to said collaboration (such as emotional intelligence and communication), however, without which the collaboration could not have occurred in the first place. In so far as collaboration pertains to the management, avoidance and/or dispersion of conflict, the literature sheds light into the use of collaboration as a relationship management tool alongside communication (Vaaland, 2004; Gransberg, Dillon, Reynolds, & Boyd, 1999; Chiochio, Forgues, Paradis, & Iordanova, 2011)

According to Wu, Liu, Zhao & Zuo (2017), conflicts are an inevitability in complex, large-scale projects that involve diverse, multi-disciplinary project teams. Further, Wu et al. (2017, p. 1466) define conflict as “mutual interactions among project teams due to different perspectives on project objectives (e.g. quality, time, cost, safety) as well as poor communication.” Conversely, academics such as Wall & Callister (1995) take a more prescriptive approach to defining conflict, wherein conflict begins and is maintained when one party is ‘opposing’ or ‘frustrating’ the concerns of another party.

Vaaland (2004) argues that collaboration can only be achieved by first battling any existing conflict, through considerate and restorative dialogues and multilogues. Concurrently, Wu et al. (2017) contend that conflict can only be avoided through consistent, transparent and emotionally intelligent communication. The ability to manifest and adapt communication in this way, to either eliminate or to resolve conflict, is a competency which does not appear frequently in the literature pertaining project manager efficacy, team-building or leadership, and is consequently an under-acknowledged and underdeveloped competency in the project management industry.

3. Hypothesis

The literature suggests that there is a tangible correlation between emotional intelligence competencies – that is the introspective and extrospective understanding and manipulation of emotions to achieve desired outcomes – and project manager efficacy (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Rezvani, Khosravi, & Ashkanasy, Examining the interdependencies among emotional intelligence, trust, and performance in infrastructure projects: A multilevel study, 2018; Clarke, Projects are Emotional: How project managers' emotional awareness can influence decisions and behaviours in projects, 2010; Bredillet, Tywoniak, & Dwivedula, 2015). However, there is a discernible gap in the existing body of knowledge as to the impact of communication as both a determiner of and determined by the emotional intelligence and overall human skills of a project manager.

This research paper addresses the gaps in understanding around communication as a determiner of project manager efficacy, project team dynamics, and project success by analysing the personal experiences of project management practitioners. The results of this exploration will help to determine answers to the following research questions:

RQ1. Are communication styles and the related 'human skills' or emotional intelligence used by project managers a conscious choice, and if so: how and why do they communicate with different stakeholders?

RQ1.1 How do different stakeholders subsequently react to that consciously chosen style of communication?

RQ2. How does a project manager's communication style and interpersonal behaviour influence their perception of success in the project environment?

4. Research Method

The purpose of this research project is to determine how communication manifests in a project team environment and how it impacts the efficacy of a project manager when they are engaged in dialogues and multilogues with different project stakeholders. The interviews were structured in such a way as to elicit the participant's personal experiences and observations pertaining to any correlations between communication and their personal efficacy as a project manager, the dynamics of the project team, and/or the overall success of the projects that they have either managed or participated in during their career.

4.1 Participants/Sampling

This project required a minimum of six interviews in order to procure the depth and breadth of communication and project management intelligence and subsequently deduce meaningful insights pertaining to how communication manifests when managing people in projects. Adults ($N = 6$) aged 18 to 65 years (female = 66.66%) were recruited using a convenience sampling method within the population of Brisbane, Australia.

The six individuals who ultimately volunteered to participate in the interview were relatively demographically homogenous. Two of the interviewees identified as male and the other four interviewees identified as female. Only two interviewees came from a culturally and linguistically diverse background – Brazil and South Africa – though one of these two interviewees has lived and worked in Australia for over 20 years and held Australian citizenship at the time of interview.

Three of the interviewees were employed at a senior level, with the others working in either mid-tier or mid-senior tier project management positions. All interviewees had a minimum of 10 years' experience in the Project Management industry.

4.2 Design

This research project employed a cross-sectional study design scaffold conducive to a semi-structured, qualitative interview of practicing project management professionals with a diversity of experience across organisation size and industry.

One of the interviewees was a personal industry contact, with knowledge of the institutional particularities supporting this research project, who was subsequently selected as an interview control. The remaining interviewees were recruited according to a convenience sampling method; importantly, this method leveraged the professional social networking channel LinkedIn to identify geographically proximate and professionally pertinent prospective participants for the study. In total, five of the 29 individuals contacted were willing and able to take part in the interviews.

Prospective interviewees were individually approached through LinkedIn's private messaging service, with a personalised iteration of a generic research interview invitation message (Appendix 1). Once a prospective interviewee had accepted the invitation to participate in the research project, a lengthier conversation ensued – either through LinkedIn's private messaging service or via email – in order to ascertain a mutually-acceptable time and location for the interview to transpire.

Interviews lasted between 35 and 65 minutes, with each interview recorded and supplemented by short hand notes taken by the researcher. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 2) was devised according to the Critical Incident Technique approach (Flanagan, 1954). This approach minimizes the risk of generic or socially desirable responses and focuses on identifying specific behavioural data. At any moment where the interviewee expressed an especially salient insight into the relationship between communication and project management, the researcher summarised and reiterated that key point back to the respondent. In this way, the researcher was able to maximise the validity of any inferences that were drawn from the interview.

4.3 Social Media in Research

The benefit of using a professional social networking platform such as LinkedIn is the inexpensive, unobtrusive, discretionary and transparent nature of both its 'profile' service as well as its private messaging service (Tsatsou, 2016; Mastalerz, 2017; Stockwell, 2016; Unkelos-Shpigel, Sherman, & Hadar, 2015). Interview candidates were able to be vetted according to their suitability to the research project, whether their experiences complemented those of other participants, and uphold the convenience sampling method by ensuring both interviewee and interviewer were sufficiently proximate to facilitate the interview (Mastalerz, 2017; Unkelos-Shpigel, Sherman, & Hadar, 2015; Meho, 2006; Denscombe, 2014). Unkelos-

Shpigel, Sherman & Hadar (2015) herald LinkedIn as one of the best platforms for vetting and procuring research interview participants, hence its use in this research paper.

5. Findings

5.1 Communication in Project Management

The interviewees, according to their professional experience, all asserted that communication is the most important component of any project; not only from the perspective of the project manager but also with respect to the project deliverables and to the operational health of the project team. All interviewees perceived communication as an action which transcended technical competence and required relatively precise emotional intelligence skills in order to be successful.

Communication takes on a totally different form [in projects]; an important one, because it is the essence of your success or failure. It is the essence of the way people build your teams. It is the essence to your rapport with your stakeholders and with your team and with everybody that the project affects. You need to get that right. [. . .] It is absolutely critical (Project Manager M1)

Communication is one of the most important pillars to successful projects; and the reason for project failure [. . .] is due to lack of communication (Project Manager M2).

I think [communication] is critical for the reason that most projects from my experience involve a change of state. So, an 'as is' to a 'to be' and generally what changes state will have consequential business or people impacts. So, in terms of realizing the desired to be state you need to change the process of what people do or how people operate or how they structured to have a people impact. And so, getting people onside or working with them and dealing with resistance to change is paramount (Project Manager F1)

For me, it's always been important to keep the people involved in your project close [. . .] even if you are working across countries, across cultures and across time zones, you must be able to build rapport with your stakeholders and communicate together as a team. If you cannot do this, then you do not have a project team, you have individual people haphazardly working on a project. (Project Manager F4).

For some of the interviewed project managers, communication was not only the most important part of any project but also the most challenging and the most enjoyable part of their job. This was particularly true for the female project managers, who often received praise and acknowledgement from colleagues because of their 'different' project management style and overall record of project success. Further, those project managers who found joy in the communication aspects of the project also reported having better relationships with their

stakeholders, and therefore found it easier to find jobs in the project management space and easier to build project teams.

Project management is a very technical task. There are technical parts of project management that anyone can learn; like project schedules, writing reports, etc. Those technical things are not what is challenging and enjoyable for me about project management. It's all around the communication, team management, customer management, vendor management, that's the challenging part. The rest of it you can do, anyone can do, because it is a technical skill. To me [communication is] what has made project management interesting (Project Manager F5)

According to the information collected from the project managers, communication is the activity that consumes most of a project manager's time and energy. Each of the interviewees were able to explicitly recall the level of detail, thought, and consideration that they have invested in developing, maintaining, adapting and delivering their communication strategies before, during and after their various projects.

Communication apparently is 80% of the project manager's time according to the PMI. It is a big deal. Communication is the most important thing. You need to deal with people all the time and you need to deal with suppliers, or the receptionist, or people to purchase your items from you or people to do the work. Without it, you cannot have a project (Project Manager F4)

5.2 Communication Channels

Communication as a technical process that is strategically developed as part of the project's initiation phases, that is the process of deciding which and how methods and media will be used to disseminate information throughout the project team, requires significant consideration, according to the interviewed project managers. Collaborating with project team members during this phase has yielded positive results for the interviewed project managers, as it allows the project manager to – in the short-term – select communication methods and media that will ultimately be conducive to the individuals who will be made to use them in the long-term.

I think it's important to communicate in a variety of different styles for thinking. I think my perspective is that you need to have face to face communications wherever possible. You need to have that supplemented by something written; whether that's in paper writing or electronic writing that needs to be kind of formal channels as well as informal channels.

I tend to try to find ways for there to be feedback loops; because the communication ought to be both ways. So, here's the project plan but also tell me how this works and how that fits and where the issues – all this needs to be drawn from the grassroots. So, two-way feedback mechanism is those super

important and I think it then is like a bit of a marketing mix for all of those channels (Project Manager F1)

When asked about the trajectory of communications in project management, specifically with respect to how the interviewed project managers foresee technology's role in their delivery of communication within project, the vast majority of interviewees (five of six) did not perceive technology to be a driving force in the future of communication.

Technology is only an enabler. It is not the driver (Project Manager M2).

Using technology to communication depends on which business you're in. IT people, for example, who spend all their time on their computer or phones, they do talk, they just talk differently than you do. If you're not used to doing something, you'll feel insecure. So, people are maybe just insecure to learn how to talk with and to approach other people. [. . .] I think technology can make it so that people do not know how to talk. So it's important that we still keep doing face-to-face communication (Project Manager F4).

One project manager, however, personally preferred communication but believed that technology is the frontier of collaborative team communication; primarily because the project-dedicated platforms that have been developed facilitate an incomparable degree of real-time, inclusive communication.

As a team I've noticed that we primarily use a collaboration tool called Microsoft Teams, and it's really just an information sharing platform. I have teams for each project and inside those teams you can have conversations like a blog, you can add files, you can add wikis, whatever you want. When I manage projects, I use Teams as my main communication source. One of the reasons is because if there's something that needs to be discussed you don't have to call a team meeting or tele-conferences, just put the question into Teams and wait for people to respond (Project Manager F6).

5.3 A holistic approach

As much as communication was perceived to be an interpersonal skill which surpassed other technical project management competencies in terms of complexity and execution, the interviewees also saw communication as an activity that transcended the scope (particularly time) of the project.

All forms of communication – formal or informal, during work time or after hours – from the project manager to project stakeholders ultimately contributed to the overall performance of the project team and the ultimate success of the project.

Communication is holistic. It starts when the person rings you and says "Hi. I've got a project for you." You open it up. You do not manipulate people. You don't

distort the truth when it comes to progress or the environment. If it's bad, it's bad. If it's good, it's good. If you need help, you need help.

Once you are seen to be an open, honest person you will get the same in return and you develop your integrative style. Which will differ. I morph my style from project to project although what would mean what you see is what you get. I still need to be cognisant of the fact that this project needs slightly more critical. So, I will take a little bit more of a harder approach with my team and I will still try to communicate in the same way but with a degree of urgency so the dynamics of the project will dictate how flexible you become, without diminishing the communication (Project Manager M1).

Another key consideration in the holistic delivery of communication as a project manager, is the role of the project manager as 'team leader'. One of the interviewed project managers has experience working as a project manager in the military and highlighted the significance of 'project leadership' – specifically implementing the servant leadership management model – as the human-centric equivalent of the more technical 'management' aspects of a project manager's role.

What we do is we work for the people below us. [. . .] One of the things you learn is you don't take that next promotion and the next appointment to be in the employment, you take it to do better for the people below you than what you saw from the person before you. So, there's a focus on continuous improvement and it's about them. It's not about me. And the more you do for them, the more you get recognized as being a good leader. [. . .] But I find that a lot of people in commercial environments tend to misunderstand servant leadership. It's not always about being a servant. There are times when you need to be more situational (Project Manager M2).

6. Findings – Adaptability

6.1 Personality Adaptability

Adaptability is one intrapersonal manifestation of emotional intelligence, and one which the interviewed project managers had not paid much conscious thought to. However, the importance of communication adaptability permeated through each interviewee's professional anecdotes, explanations of industry practice and reflections on their project management experience thus far.

One particularly insightful statement from an interviewee succinctly described the importance of personality adaptability with respect to project success and the greater operation of organisation for which you work for. Interesting to note is the acknowledgement that projects are temporary and transient, and that the outcome of a project manager's intervention will linger in the organisation long after the project has included. Thus, the suggestion from the

interviewed project manager was that a sustainable and selfless model of management should be adopted so as to achieve the best outcomes for your client both within the context of the project and into the future.

Communication is in the response that you get. If you're not getting your project deliverables, it's generally because you're not communicating the task in a way that makes sense to them. Or you haven't communicated the importance or the time criticality.

As a project manager and as change managers, we change our communication techniques based on the stakeholders. So, while personality is very much a part of it from a stakeholder perspective, it's not so much a part of it for us because we have to change to adopt their preferred method to get the best outcome.

Further, stakeholders' personalities are recognized by the organization. If you change their personality as part of the project, you're actually affecting the business as usual output and potentially changing the way their employees/employer feels about them and then the team dynamic. So, there's a flow on effect. Whereas if they get to keep their personalities and we change to adopt their requirements then the project continues seamlessly as needed (Project Manager M2)

Each of the interviewed project managers reported taking an introspective approach to their external, team-directed communications. Two of the interviewed project managers acknowledged that in order to effectively manage the diverse personalities that contribute to a project (emotional intelligence), the project manager must first develop and maintain those skills by managing their own personalities.

We bring to any project our own bias in terms your own preferred mechanism; and so, people should naturally gravitate those who use similar mechanisms, as they are somewhat easier to understand because you can read the nuances.

But that being said I think that's where the where the skill and the professionalism comes in in terms of understanding. Even a challenging conversation or a challenging cohort to communicate with is like "we're just in a different place" and "we need more communication or more attentional time" in terms of where they are in terms of the project. So maybe they're facing more challenges, maybe the work is actually at a peak time, and it's hard to articulate that in terms of their own concern about the project.

I think that there is this natural affinity with people who have the same style as you. But with that being said, that might not necessarily be where you should be investing the time (Project Manager F1).

Ultimately what we're doing is changing the way business does something which means we're changing the people which actually means it is not a technical project.

Humans are crazy, humans change, and personalities change. You might be an introvert as a teenager and come out of his shell as an adult and then might become like a half introvert, half extrovert on the spectrum as an old person. Personalities are based on what you experience in life (Project Manager M2)

Building on the concept of introspection and relationship building, the importance of trust and loyalty to project efficacy was referred to by several of the interviewed project managers. One project manager specifically targeted the role that trust, loyalty and relationships play in minimizing risks in a project. Their argument centred on the concept that communicating honestly and with humanity to project team members builds a deeper rapport between the team member and the project, consequently ensuring project stability.

The team needs to trust me, and they need to be loyal to me for the whole project. They need to know what my strength are, and they need to know some of my weaknesses. And I need to be very honest about in my communication. So that they understand me. The only way you can understand someone's strengths and weaknesses is communicating with them and communicating on a very human level. Rather than the communication of "well, I put it in the schedule. It's in the schedule, you should be reading it." Those are all forms of communication, and things that help people to follow. But it's very structured and it gives no humanity to your team (Project Manager F5).

6.2 Communication Adaptability

All of the interviewed project managers establish a communication strategy in the planning phases of any project, however these plans are rarely static nor are they transferrable between projects owing to the bespoke approach that each project manager takes to the individual attitudes, behaviours and dynamics of the teams.

Communication strategy must be developed to fit the individual's style, not to fit a process. (Project Manager M1)

So typically, [communicating as a project manager] is about understanding the person and say understanding their background, where they've come from, and that gives you an idea as to how they think. Once you understand how they think you can typically explain things in a way that they understand. It might not have anything to do with the project. do with the project. You could use an example that they're familiar with in their environment and at the end of bring it back to say that this is what the project is – and they have that lightbulb moment.

That light bulb moment is what every project and change manager is after in every conversation we have. If we don't get the that lightbulb moment, then we haven't communicated what we needed to (Project Manager M2).

Equally, if not more, important to project success is the adaptability of project team members, and the ability for project managers to use communication to quickly and effectively integrate new team members into the often very complex and dynamic project environment.

Communication in projects is key because it's a quick-fire environment. We have to get people to come into the project and be effective immediately. You imagine that in a normal job, you come in and you have like a three-month grace period. You use your probation to figure out what your job is and then that the employer gets out that you can do your job essentially.

But in a project, I haven't got time for that. I need people to come in and to be able to hit the ground running and realistically, you need to be able to start doing your job the next day. Even if you slowly build up how much of your job you can do in a day. It's pretty much immediate. Then the impacts of things going wrong is far higher as well. So, we've got set deadlines. It's not like we can move things, it's not like if we fail this quarter, we can pick it up the next quarter or anything. Everything just must be done. [. . .] I always find it fascinating with project managers because there are completely different styles. My style is very much about the team (Project Manager F5)

6.3 Stakeholder Communication

Each of the interviewed project managers had exhaustive anecdotes about their experiences communicating with both internal and external stakeholders, and this was also the area of communication which the project managers had the greatest insights into how they have experienced the management of human behaviour through communication. The process through which one project manager uses communication to manage stakeholders is detailed below.

You need to sit down and say, "okay if I'm talking to my client what is he or she need to know?" What they are not interested in is the day by day blows. They want me to tell them "are you on track or you're not, and if you're not what the hell are you going to do about it?" [. . .] So, you're going to keep them on track and keep them comfortable. And keep them engaged because they are a member of your project team.

I look at all of those individual groups and individuals that you mention as my project team. There's me and my actual delivery group, and as the rings go out, they are proportionately placed as to their importance – if I may say so and use that term, and I use it loosely. But they are still in that circle of my project management.

So, if you look at contractors and subcontractors, I need to keep them informed of any Change but also any potential change because it affects how they deliver and when they deliver to me.

Then if you look at steering committees, or project control boards depending on what your organization has, they are there to guide you. They need factual information. Don't fudge the figures, do not misinform, because you'll get called out. You need to be very direct, very upfront, because these people are giving you valuable time – so don't mess about.

Then you look at your actual team members and the diversity of that group. I will always go to someone to whom I am tasking with a deliverable and I'll say to them "how would you like to communicate with me?" Now, that's a profound difference because other [project manager] say: "give me your report on Friday 4 o'clock" and [their team member] says: "shit, I have such a lot to do, now I gotta find time to do this."

Straight away, before they've even thought about their project, you've created a mental barrier [. . .] Now you are actually impeding communication. [. . .] and yet you have even started your project. You are building barriers rather than breaking them down (Project Manager M1)

Another project manager expanded on the idea of stakeholder communication to directly correlate poor stakeholder communication with the potential risks and implications to the project.

I would say it is the biggest key thing, because communication factors into your relationships with external stakeholders, including big contracts that you sign with suppliers, and their failures. If you're not regularly communicating, then you don't know where they're at. If you don't know how to communicate, and you don't understand what they're actually telling you - whether that's the truth or not - then you won't catch those important risks to your project deliverables (Project Manager F5)

6.4 Cultural Adaptability

Three of the six interviewed project managers insightfully highlighted the importance of communication adaptability in a multicultural environment. As project management is adopted and implemented both in breadth (internationally, across industries, across organisation types) and depth (the projectisation of organisations from the executive, strategic level to the operational, functional level), successfully communicating while simultaneously navigating multiculturalism will be an increasingly poignant consideration for project managers.

You require a little bit of flexibility to understand other people's cultures. [. . .] I think that cultures and personalities both play a part in bringing together your team, which means you have to think about how you communicate with people to make everyone comfortable and make sure everyone gets their job done (Project Manager F4).

You need to tailor to the environment you're going in to [. . .] because you could be working in Australia, in what we perceive to be a single culture, yet embedded in your team is a multicultural society.

So, although people conform to Australian norms you've got to realize that a Muslim guy is going to go pray five times in a day and needs to go to the mosque on a Friday. [. . .] So, you have to then look at how you create a communication strategy around that to [. . .] communicate to all of those players that we need to up our game on the other available days; and not restrict cultural practices.

Then you've got the other side of it way although you may be working in what you perceived to be an Australia single cultural norm. The way people communicate, it is still embedded in their psyche. So, if you're talking to a Chinese, if you're talking to an Indian, if you're talking to somebody from Germany who is very black and white very direct. You need to tailor your communication for each individual. One size fits all? Absolutely not (Project Manager M1).

7. Findings – Collaboration

7.1 Compliance

Eliciting compliance from project team members was identified as one of the most instrumental, and intuitive, manifestations of communication in the management of human behaviour, team dynamics and human resource efficacy in the project environment.

People need to want to work with you. They're here to do their job. They're getting paid but then still they can influence the degree to which they comply. [. . .] So, you can see how important and influential communication actually is (Project Manager M1).

There's loyalty from the crack of a whip and from fear. But I think that's the worst way to work. Because as soon as something else comes out - which is going to happen in Brisbane, things are going to come up all the time. I mean, we all get called on a daily basis about new initiatives: "do you want to come to this, do you want to come to this". If they're not loyal, they'll go and that leaves a massive risk to your project (Project Manager F5).

Understanding the motivations of the project team members, and 'playing to' those motivations, was an effective method of compliance that was identified by four of the six interviewed project managers.

I always try to understand what people want out of things, so if you were coming to join my project, in your mind you'd be thinking "oh this will look great on my CV" or "this will contribute great this" – and then you build trust, [. . .] and they

can see that you're actually investing in them and then they'll stay with your project (Project Manager F5).

7.2 Conflict

When asked about strategies for communicating with difficult people, the interviewed project managers again took an introspective approach, choosing to instead question why the person is being difficult. The ensuing discussion of communication centred around the importance of both communication methods and communication behaviours.

Communicating to your audience in a way that they would prefer to be communicated to or in a variety of ways of being and ensure that the message is getting through is important whether they whether they are specifically a cultural identity or whether it's age diversity or whether it's still diversity in perspective [. . .] I would take the perspective that you should communicate in the way that people want to be communicated with (Project Manager F1).

It's also about listening. That's the biggest thing with all those difficult people is that usually they just want to be listened to (Project Manager F6).

According to one of the interviewed project managers, consistency in communication is key to avoiding conflict and resistance in the project team environment. That may not necessarily manifest as the same style or method of communication throughout the course of the project, but rather as the absence of uncertainty among the team as to the project manager's commonly used communication styles and their expectations of communication within the project team.

I think that the answer is yes except that it's nuanced through the milestones and if you hit a pocket of resistance or if you're faced with one of the risks that you have identified through your risk matrix and something comes to light, you will use your mitigation strategies and you might then end up changing your tone a bit. I think that you set this up beforehand so that you have some sort of consistency and not at the whim of reaction (Project Manager F1)

7.3 Influence

In the same way as compliance was one example of communication as a human resource management tool, 'influence' equally emerged in discussions around the project manager's ability to 'mange' or control stakeholders who were either external to the project or higher in the organisation hierarchy and thus not under the direct control of the project manager.

Each [stakeholder] needs to be influenced in a different way. As a project manager you don't necessarily have direct reports, but you do have direct influence into everything.

It's not always about asking a question or having a conversation. A lot of the time is about observing the senior leadership team and how they talk about the projects, and the unconscious biases they may have. Then it's about understanding how you can influence those unconscious biases or those are the biases that people psychologically tend to have. The better project managers are the ones that understand that science behind how people think (Project Manager M2).

7.4 Design Thinking

Design thinking was a concept that was discussed by name by one of the interviewed project managers, but referred to in principle by four of the other five interviewees. These five project managers who discussed design thinking all resonated with the idea that humans are intrinsically motivated by their emotions. The result is that each project manager identified the need to 'market' themselves and their project to not only external stakeholders, but also to their project team.

Design thinking focuses on the end user and the emotion that they have with the product that we're trying to deliver. How does this project make you feel? How does it make you think? Would you tell your friend about this? Again, that comes down to personality psychology of humanity and understanding humans.

Every stakeholder has their own unique approach. It's all about target audience. Target audiences at the senior level and the executive level, they want the high-level points and they generally don't want the detail. However, some managers will want the detail because they want to feel like they're involved. So, every stakeholder is unique, and I guess the goal is to rapidly understand their uniqueness so that you can communicate in the way that best works for them and the project. Otherwise you're just wasting time (Project Manager M2).

8. Findings – Project Success

8.1 Nature versus Nurture: Communication Competencies

There were mixed opinions among the interviewees as to whether communication and communication behaviours such as collaboration were able to be taught, learned and/or developed by project managers. Ultimately, the majority opinion was that communication skills can be developed so long as the project manager has a functional grasp of these skills already and is personally inclined to embrace development on both an extrospective and introspective level.

The principle I have is that it's pretty easy to plan tasks. The challenge with project management is taking people with you. Tasks are quite easy, and you can build

capacity and ability for people to complete tough new tasks if that's what's required. But the subtlety of communication inside of a project is often what can make or break project success (Project Manager F1).

It takes a while for you to finally understand [communication]. You have to fail a few times, and see other people failing a few times, and then you learn from that and improve next time (Project Manager F4).

You can train hard skills, but you can't train soft skills. You can try, and you can improve people's soft skills by all means, but often not in the short amount of time that you have in a project (Project Manager F5).

8.2 Project and/or Change Manager?

The change management profession was not explicitly incorporated into the line of questioning which underpinned the interviews, however four of the six project managers mentioned the juxtaposition and lamented at the dichotomy between project managers and change managers. All four of the interviewees argued that change managers were either redundant or detrimental to the project manager's ability to manage their team dynamics, and thus to the overall project success.

Concurrently, the four project managers who discussed change management argued that emotionally intelligent project managers were essentially change managers, considering the 'soft' skills that any effective project manager now holds in their competency 'toolkit'.

A project is essentially just a change, specifically the business side of change; and then you have change management, which is your people side of change. I think what we're seeing is a progression towards project managers and change managers becoming the one person or the one profession. People are naturally resistant to change. You need to communicate why they're going through another change and how it's good for them.

Because, the project side of the management we are communicating the time output requirements the complexities of stakeholder engagement, quality, cost control; and we're communicating that through the project team. But then in the absence of a change manager, I'm also dealing with the requirement to get buy in from the users of the project. If it's a technical platform that will involve speaking in their language without the technical jargon; then also being able to communicate technically to the technical hermits; whilst also being able to transfer both of those needs to the senior leaders and the executive teams (Project Manager M2).

8.3 Perceptions of project success

One of the most interesting findings to emerge from this research project is that the interviewed project managers defined project success in terms of communication efficacy and acknowledgement within their project teams and among stakeholders – rather than as the successful achievement of project deliverables.

Without [communication], your project although successfully delivering an objective will be deemed a failure because people are not fully engaged and not fully aware as to how you got to your end journey. So, success is not simply measured by delivering the item you set out to build, it is the journey. [. . .] I always say to people communication and quality commences at the commencement of your project and ends when you walk away and then do your after sales service to make sure everything was working correctly (Project Manager M1)

If you communicate well, not just speaking but it's the listening skills, the looking into people, having emotional and social intelligence; if you've got all of those things then you can set yourself up for success. If you're missing a lot of those things, you're going to fail. You might think things are a success, but they whole lot of people following you or trying to work with you might not.

A lot of project managers think they're very successful because they have all their ducks in a row; they have their schedule, they have their initiation document, it's all written in the project plan. But once those documents are created, they are very rarely looked back at (Project Manager F5).

Concurrently, project failure or less successful projects are identified as those that are led by uncollaborative or static project managers, and/or those with a critical communication deficit.

People put communication as a category in their project plan. They build it for compliance and then they go and do it the way they think it should be done. That's a recipe for disaster (Project Manager M1).

There's one type of personality that I've encountered many times. Where they have this ability to not see their own shortfalls. So, they're not self-aware they're not self-critical when they're in management positions where they need to be self-critical. And that and that creates a very difficult environment to communicate with because it doesn't matter what you say they can change their mind the next day or they want to be really involved and next week they don't want to be involved. That they don't have a structured approach to what they do because they're not aware enough of the fact that they don't have that (Project Manager M2).

Communication is immensely key, because it can break at every level. So even if you're communicating what you need, it can still be broken at every other level below you. So, it's the way in which you communicate and that you communicate through all the different streams. It's very interesting (Project Manager F3)

I've actually never thought it was possible for project managers just to be technical. I think there's no common sense in that approach in any shape or form, and that it's a failure. If you go into an organisation and deliver a project only based on those technical requirements, without looking at the impact of your project on the business around you, then you're no good. You might have gotten to the finishing line, and delivered the project, but if you've destroyed everyone else along the way and they never want to get you back into the organisation again, then that's a failure (Project Manager F5)

One interviewed project manager acknowledge that the absence of communication is not only a risk to the deliverables of the project, but also a risk to the stability, sustainability and wellbeing of the project team.

I have seen horrendous communication, horrendous; everybody has bad days but it's being conscious and knowing that you're having those moments as well. But lack of communication can actually just destroy massive projects (Project Manager F5)

9. Discussion

9.1 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence, specifically the ability to exploit both your own and others' emotions to elicit the desired attitudes and behaviours from an individual or group, is increasingly acknowledged as one of the most fundamental competencies of a successful project manager (Clarke, *Projects are Emotional: How project managers' emotional awareness can influence decisions and behaviours in projects*, 2010; Rezvani, Khosravi, & Ashkanasy, *Examining the interdependencies among emotional intelligence, trust, and performance in infrastructure projects: A multilevel study*, 2018). The research findings demonstrate that emotional intelligence and a project manager's subsequent ability to manipulate human behaviour, are integral to fostering effective communication and collaboration in project team environments.

Equally, a project manager's choices about their communication style dictates the emotional environment of the project team and the nature of the interpersonal relationships that stakeholders cultivate with the project. The stability of this environment and strength of these relationships are major determiners of project team performance and ultimately – project success (Seabra & Almeida, 2015; Zulch, 2014; Akdemir, 2014; Altindag & Kosedagi, 2015; Buil, Martinez, & Matute, 2019).

9.2 Holistic Communication

As defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2019), the term 'holistic' refers to a philosophy "characterised by the belief that the parts of something are intimately interconnected and

explicable only by reference to the whole” (Holistic, 2019). The project management literature speaks less about the importance of communication holism, particularly compared to how pervasive the concept of holism was in the research interviews. As of 2019, the Project Management Institute served more than 2.9 million professionals across 208 countries and territories around the world, speaking to proliferation of project management as an international industry and the ensuing high demand for project managers.

Considering that project management is, by its very nature, finite building and maintaining positive working relationships is fundamental to the ongoing sustainability of a project manager’s employment. Contemporary project managers such as those who were interviewed for this research, have identified the need to take a long-term, universal view of project management to simultaneously achieve enduring project success and to also develop a professional reputation that will facilitate future employment opportunities. This is an arguably positive trend for both the practical application of project management, and the socio-cultural standards of the profession.

In terms of how communication is delivered, there is a plethora of research, opinion, literature and debate pertaining to the role of technology in communication and project management. The influence of technology on communication is one which is debated across every industry and every discipline; however this relationship is particularly pertinent to project management as projects fundamentally depend on the implementation of ‘proven’ tools, techniques, processes and programs in order to minimise risk and effectively achieve the project outcomes.

The literature pertaining to communication generally focuses on communication as a behavioural practice, and often neglects the implications associated with the modes of delivery – particularly in the project environment, where the complexity and intensity of the work exacerbates any inconsistencies, ineffectiveness or errors in the communication experience (Morrow & Nandurdikar, 2018; Gilchrist, Burton-Jones, & Green, 2018).

It is important that the industry’s understanding of communication as both a technical and interpersonal competency be formalised, so that standards can be developed around the use of technology in the facilitation of project management. Without such standards and considering the rapid development and haphazard adoption of communication technologies throughout society, it is likely that technology will pose a significant risk to project managers in the future.

9.3 Personality & Communication Adaptability

A thought-provoking dichotomy emerges within both the literature and the interviews, whereby both sources espouse the importance of genuineness, authenticity, relationship building, and building trust among the project team (emotional intelligence) to the success of the project; however, emotional intelligence is fundamentally the manipulation of emotions in order to achieve certain productive outcomes. The informal, biased nature of such activity

inherently carries a risk of exploitation and/or failure, though neither the literature nor the interviewees identified these risks to any significant extent (Silvius, Kampinga, Paniagua, & Mooi, 2017).

Personality adaptability also depends on the project manager having enough emotional intelligence to regularly engage in introspective and self-development practices. Although this seemed to be common among the participant sample of this research, the anecdotes of the interviewed project managers suggest that perhaps such high-level emotional intelligence is not the norm. Further, although the literature does not necessitate introspection or self-development, it does require that effective project managers have a high degree of empathy and the ability to look at situations from a variety of perspectives – which are parallel skills and abilities (Fisher, 2011; Kets De Vries, 2001; Thamhain, 2004; Rosenau, 1998).

Personality adaptability is perhaps the most difficult competency to discern from this brief research exercise, however it may be the competency which carries the most consequence for project managers and the success of their projects as it seems to underpin the fundamental communication competencies and interpersonal behaviours that ultimately determine stakeholder's perceptions as to project success or failure.

Communication adaptability is arguably the physical manifestation of the aforementioned personality adaptability. In order for a project manager's 'personality adaptability' to resonate with a target audience, their communications must also be technically adapted to convey that personality adaptation. This is reflected in the literature which discusses emotional intelligence as the forefather of effective project communication and the impact on project team dynamics (Rezvani, et al., 2016; Bjorvatn & Wald, 2018).

The interviewed project managers all began their discussions of communication in project management and its impact on human behaviour and team dynamics with statements asserting that communication is 'in the eye of the beholder' – specifically, communication must be a behaviour, action and process that is guided by the grassroots of any project, as the efficacy of any communication is dependent on the receiver not the sender.

Keeping this in mind, and also considering that approximately 40% of all project fail owing to insufficient communication, adaptability has significant implications for the project management industry (Butt, Naaranoja, & Savolainen, 2016; Mok, Shen, & Yang, 2015; Zhao, Lu, Zuo, & Zillante, 2010; Alderton, 2014; Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan, 2010). Project managers must be able to forego ego and alter their own personality in order to successfully achieve or even exceed the project outcomes. Ultimately, a greater appreciation for and execution of both communication and adaptability is required in order to minimise the risk of project failure.

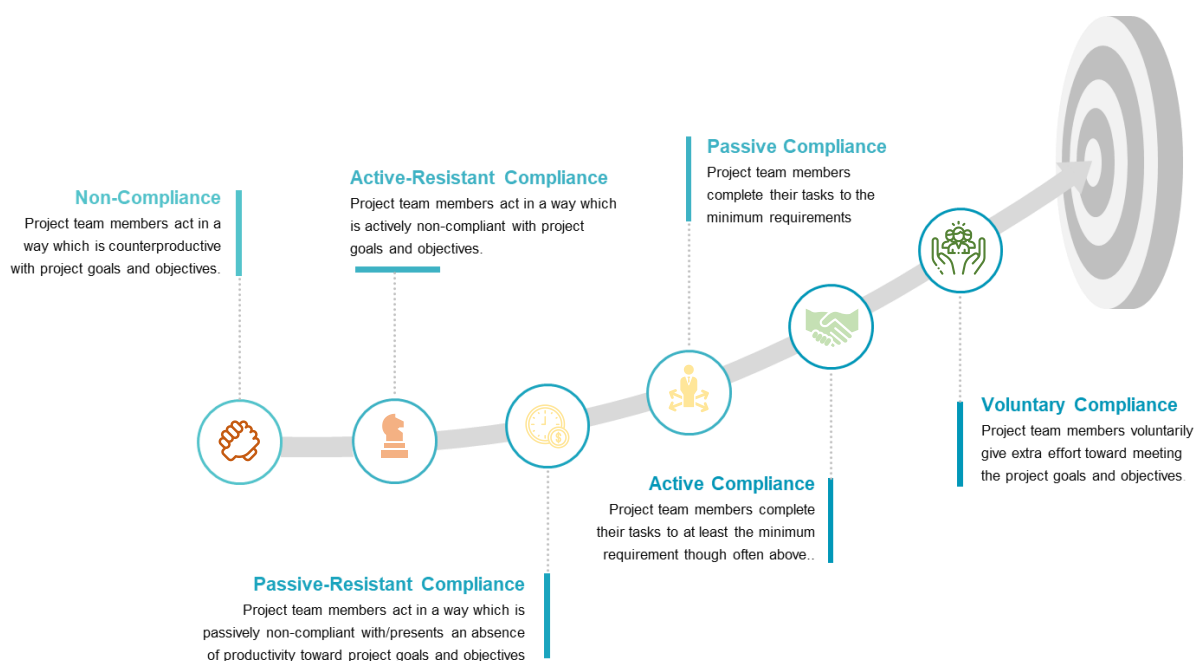
9.4 Cultural Adaptability

Cultural intelligence (CQ) and the subsequent ability to adapt your personality and communication styles to accommodate cultural differences is a skill which will become increasingly important as the project management professional continues to propagate internationally. Despite the prevalence of multiculturalism in all facets of our society, the attention paid to cultural adaptability and cross-cultural communication competencies in project management research, literature and practice is minimal (Henderson, Stackman, & Lindekilde, 2018; Gregory, Prifling, & Beck, 2009; Cramton & Hinds, 2014). In considering the prevalence of multiculturalism in our professional lives, it is important to note that the research interviews conducted for this paper yielded pertinent insights into the criticality of cultural adaptability even in a perceivably 'single-culture' environment.

The industry must develop more robust and comprehensive frameworks for addressing cross-cultural communication competencies, and cultural intelligence, among project managers. It is insufficient to simply consider communication as a technical competency considering the significant influence that communication has on the investment of each individual stakeholder engaged in the project.

9.5 Compliance & Conflict

What can be deduced from both the literature and the interviews is that compliance is but one point on a multileveled scale of personal investment in an activity, and the goal of the project manager is to communicate and collaborate in such a way as to elicit compliance (or an even greater, voluntary investment) from the project team members.



A productive project team environment comprises only passive compliance or better, whereby there are no stakeholders or external actors seeking to either passively or actively detract from the goals of the project. An effective project manager, according to the literature and the interviews, does not allow incongruences in opinion or interpersonal challenges escalate into conflict (Wu, Liu, Zhao, & Zuo, 2017; Um & Kim, 2018; Gilchrist, Burton-Jones, & Green, 2018). Rather, an emotionally intelligent project manager is able to recognise, appreciate and manage differences in the project team and adapt their communication accordingly.

This, however, is easier said than done according to the interviewed project managers. There needs to be better education and training around conflict management, cohesive team building and other socio-emotional competencies that underpin the management of individual human behaviours and the project team dynamic at large.

9.6 Influence, Stakeholder Communication & Perceptions of Project Success

Control and influence are often tenuous and fluid factors in projects, many project managers – those that were interviewed in this research project, and those interviewed in other research projects – have identified the absence of any direct authority over certain stakeholders, but do acknowledge their in-direct power as project managers to influence all stakeholders involved in their project (Pryke, Lunic, & Badi, 2015; Butt, Naaranoja, & Savolainen, 2016). As Gilchrist, Burton-Jones & Green (2018, p. 845) argue, project management is “more efficient and effective when project stakeholders are socially aligned on what the project objectives are and how they should be achieved.” It is the process of managing the attitudes and behaviours of stakeholders to achieve this social alignment that ultimately requires emotionally-intelligent communication.

The stakeholders which often require the most management in this area, according to the research, are project sponsors. Owing to the inability of project managers to either directly control sponsor behaviour or extrinsically motivate the sponsor in any way, ‘influence’ or emotionally intelligent manipulation as well as highly-selective and adaptive communication is the only means through which a project manager can manage the behaviour of a project sponsor.

This is particularly important for the perception of project success among project stakeholders. As already determined through the research, project success is determined more by the perceptions and beliefs of project stakeholders than by the successful achievement of project goals and deliverables. Managing project stakeholders through consciously selected communication – regardless of their position in the hierarchy, or whether they are internal or external to the project – will intrinsically impact the perceived success or failure of a project.

It is subsequently important then, moving forward, that project managers are provided with the opportunities to develop their communication skills and emotional intelligence, as much if not more than their technical competencies.

9.7 Nature versus Nurture: Communication Competencies

In both the literature and the interviews, there seemed to be no consensus as to whether communication competencies were a result of and thus behold to 'nature' or 'nurture'; the former describing communication as a component of the innate personality and behavioural traits of the individual, and the latter referring to communication competencies as the result of education, training, developmental experiences and/or mentorship designed to improve the skills of or compensate for any deficits in the communication skills held by the individual.

In considering the information presented through this research, supported by a relatively limited library of research and literature, there are strong arguments for the use of experiential learning to develop the communication and team management competencies of project managers (Clarke, The impact of a training programme designed to target the emotional intelligence abilities of project managers, 2010; Savelsbergh, Havermans, & Storm, 2016). One of the interviewed project managers suggested the incorporation of mentorship and traineeship arrangements within the tertiary education levels of the project management industry, with the view to connect emerging project managers with established project managers to facilitate knowledge sharing and second-hand experiential learning.

9.8 Project or Change Manager?

The profession of change management is only marginally younger than that of project management, though its impact on the industry has been significant (Worley & Mohrman, 2014; Raineri, 2011; Martinsuo & Hoverfalt, 2018; Hornstein, 2015; Gareis, 2010). Unfortunately, however, the advent of the change management profession may be relatively short-lived.

Five out of the six interviewed project managers discussed, in reasonable depth, the dichotomy which exists in both commercial industry and the public sectors between the 'project manager' and 'change manager' professions. It is the opinion of all six interviewed project managers that 'change management' should exist only as a function of project management. Further, it was argued that the separation of these two functions should only occur at the discretion of the project manager, so as to minimizing the dispersion of decision-making powers throughout the project team and ultimately reduce risks associated with the 'meddling' of change managers.

The notion of 'change management' was also recurrent in the literature, although the academic discussions centred on change management as a process underpinning project management activities, as much as it is an independent concept within the change management profession (Worley & Mohrman, 2014; Raineri, 2011; Martinsuo & Hoverfalt, 2018; Hornstein, 2015; Gareis, 2010). However, the aforementioned grievances that some project managers hold toward the change management profession were not present.

The theoretical and industry implications of this are consequently two-folds. Firstly, more empirical research must be conducted into the project-change manager dichotomy in order to determine whether the two professions are required in a contemporary, emotionally-intelligent project environment (Raineri, 2011; Worley & Mohrman, 2014; Martinsuo & Hoverfalt, 2018). Secondly, if it is determined that the presence of a change manager is detrimental to the efficacy of the project manager and thus to the success of project deliverables, then industry authorities must investigate a potential restructure and re-incorporation of 'change management' into the project process – this might be through dedicated change training at the educational level, or through the stipulation of a change lead into major, complex projects.

10. Conclusion

This investigation into the importance of communication adaptability and collaboration in managing the human behaviour and team dynamics of projects contributes to a broader body of literature pertaining to the correlation between project manager emotional intelligence and project success. The research conducted for this project has provided empirical evidence to suggest that communication and collaboration are conscious decisions by project managers, and that styles and methods of communication differ from stakeholder to stakeholder in any project. Further, it could be discerned that communication and interpersonal behaviour have a direct influence on stakeholder perception of project success – which, according to the research and as a revelation that was not anticipated when beginning the research, is subsequently a major determinant of overall project success.

A number of other, unanticipated themes emerged through the literature and research interviews, including different forms of adaptability and compliance versus influence as manifests of collaboration; it is these nuances to the original research subject that provide the greatest insight into the specific ways in which communication, adaptability and collaboration are important to a project manager when managing a team and when striving toward project success. For industry, this means that communication adaptability should be embraced as a fundamental project management competency.

10.1 Strengths & Limitations

The results of this research project into the correlation between communication and management success support, and are supported by, similar studies conducted both within and external to the project management discipline; which consequently reinforces the quality and validity of this project. Existing literature into the importance of communication to project management is abundant, and this project contributes to this greater body of knowledge by isolating adaptability and collaboration as determinants of successful person-to-person communication executed by project managers.

However, no research project comes without limitations. The results of this research should be consumed with caution bearing in mind the limited sample size and relative socio-cultural homogeneity of the interviewees, considering that that sample was drawn from a singular geographical area: South-East Queensland in Australia.

Further, while the semi-structured, qualitative approach of this research project was conducive to gaining relatively comprehensive insights into the impact of communication and collaboration on the management of human behaviour and team elements of projects, a more structured approach – perhaps incorporating quantitative methods – would be required in order to extensively test and improve the findings of this research.

Finally, it is important that this research not be used to over-generalize the complex and dynamic project management industry. The phenomenon of personalities, communication, emotional intelligence and human behaviour are highly complex and circumstantial. The experiences of the individuals interviewed in this project do not necessarily represent the experiences of the project manager constituency as a whole.

10.2 Further Research

Future studies should be characterised by further explorations into the correlation between the breadth and depth of communication between a project manager and project stakeholders, and perceptions of project success. Specifically, future studies could examine what methods and emotional intelligence techniques yield the greatest ‘success rating’ for project managers. The findings of this research project should also be leveraged to investigate the relationship between project management and change management at the personable, practical level; thus, extending the literature beyond the theoretical to examine the implications on communication, collaboration and team dynamics.

Inquiries such as these would, arguably, strengthen the understanding of communication and the work of project managers both within and external to the project management profession, therefore generating a great appreciation for the ‘unmeasurable’ work of project managers among other professions. These inquiries would also naturally integrate with and expand emerging bodies of work around the impacts of project manager emotional intelligence and, even perhaps, the integration of technology in project communication.

Appendix 1: Generic Research Interview Invitation Message

Subject: Interview Request: Bond University Research Project

Message: Good morning/evening NAME,

I was wondering if you would be willing to be interviewed as part of my Master of Communication/Master of Project Management research project at Bond University.

The overall research topic is: the importance of communication adaptability and collaboration in managing the human behaviour and team dynamics of projects. Please find enclosed a formal research project overview.

I hypothesise that interpersonal communication must be a malleable and evolutionary experience throughout the project process in order to achieve project success.

In order to test this theory, I am interviewing a diversity of Project Managers currently engaged in the industry.

I am based in Brisbane and available to chat online or in person in and around work commitments.

Please let me know if you would be willing to interviewed, otherwise I hope you have a lovely week and thank you very much for your time!

Kind Regards,

Natasha Hoppner

Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

1. How important is communication to project success?
 - 1.1. In what ways is communication important to ensuring project success?
 - 1.1.1. In a single culture environment
 - 1.1.2. In a multicultural environment
2. Is there a specific style or method of communication that you have found most effective when managing projects? Particularly with respect to communication between:
 - 2.1. The project client
 - 2.2. The project team as a collective
 - 2.3. Individuals in the project team
 - 2.4. Contractors/subcontractors
 - 2.5. The Project Control Board/Steering Committee
3. In your experience, do you believe that personalities either dictate or are dictated by different communications styles?
4. Are there certain persons or personalities that you find it easier or more difficult to communicate with?
5. Is it possible to maintain a consistent communication style throughout the entirety of a project, why/why not?
6. How have you personally altered your communication style to ensure the success of a project in the past?
 - 6.1. If you have not had to alter your communication style, why do you think that is?
7. Can you imagine a time when face-to-face(s) communication would become either uniformed, or at the extreme- obsolete?
8. Why do you believe that communication will remain a fundamental competency of a successful project manager?
9. What future project management developments do you believe are necessary to improve project managers' communication competencies?
10. Finally, do you have a particular preferred communication strategy, or perhaps one that you have personally developed, for managing a project?

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