

**COACHING AND  
PROJECT MANAGEMENT:  
RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY**

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## **A. INTRODUCTION**

This research project was undertaken by the author as part of his studies towards the attainment of a M.A. Professional Development (Coaching) degree via I-Coach Academy (Cape Town) and Middlesex University (U.K.).

The author is a certified Project Management Professional (by the U.S.-based Project Management Institute), and has been practicing as a Management Consultant and Project Manager since 1984. For the year 2004, he performed the role of Programme Manager: eServices at Stellenbosch University (Western Cape, South Africa). This work-based research project was undertaken as part of his responsibilities in this role, aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the project managers in his domain.

## **B. RESEARCH QUESTION AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

The project set out to research the question “Can coaching and the coaching relationship improve an individual’s ability to project manage?”

Certain assumptions needed to be made about the characteristics and competencies of an efficient and effective project manager. Reference material which contributed towards identification and selection of these is listed in Section G, with the full list of characteristics/competencies used in this research included as Appendix 1.

The assumptions made in formulating the expected outcomes are the following:

- Project objectives are achieved by the people assigned to the project;
- A project manager increases the probability of success of a project by:
  - o improving his/her relationships with the project personnel (thus becoming a more effective leader/manager); and
  - o improving his/her own personal efficiency and effectiveness;
- Increased emotional intelligence contributes towards improved inter-personal relationships and improved personal efficiency and effectiveness; and
- Coaching results in increased emotional intelligence.

The expected outcomes of the project were:

- Increased emotional intelligence (both self and others) resulting in improved inter-personal skills, demonstrated by improved self-management and relationship management;
- Improved communication skills, resulting in improved comprehension by others and understanding of others;
- Improved self-management (time, organisation), leading to greater efficiency and productivity;
- Increased self-esteem and esteem from others, leading to greater self-confidence and improved decision-making ability; and
- Improved leadership and management ability, demonstrated by effective teamwork (producing quality work on time).

The project was undertaken between April and August 2004, with the resultant report submitted for assessment in September 2004.

## **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

*(Only the single most interesting and relevant literature reviewed is described herein).*

Gardner and Stough, 2001, in their research paper entitled “Examining the relationship between leadership and emotional intelligence in senior level managers” reported the following: “Effective leaders were identified as those who reported transformational rather than transactional behaviours. Emotional intelligence correlated highly with all components of transformational leadership”.

Transformational leaders, as quoted in this paper, are defined variously as:

- Burns (1978): raises the needs and motivations of followers and promotes dramatic changes in individuals, groups and organisations;
- Bass (1985): arouses awareness and interest in the group or organisation, increases the confidence of individuals or groups, and attempts to move the concerns of subordinates to achievement and growth rather than existence;
- Yammarino and Dubinsky (1994): orient their subordinates towards performance beyond established standards and goals – emphasizing employee empowerment rather than dependence.

Transactional leaders, as quoted in this paper, are defined variously as:

- Burns (1978): addresses the current needs of subordinates by focusing attention on exchanges (reward for performance, mutual support and bilateral exchanges);
- Bass (1985): prefers a leader-member exchange relationship, whereby the leader fulfils the needs of the followers in exchange for their performance meeting basic expectations.

The paper quotes Lowe and Kroeck (1996) as saying that “Generally in organisations, a transformational leadership style is considered to be more effective than a transactional style, as transformational leaders have been consistently found to promote greater organisational performance”.

The paper goes on to quote Goleman’s (2001) competency-based model of emotional intelligence, designed specifically for workplace applications, which underlie four general abilities:

- Self-awareness – the ability to understand feelings and accurate self-assessment;
- Self-management – the ability to manage internal states, impulses and resources;
- Social awareness – the ability to read people and groups accurately; and
- Relationship management – the ability to induce desirable responses in others.

It further quotes Goleman (2001) as saying that the emotional competencies are job skills that can be learned.

The relevance of this paper to this research project is the following:

- Projects, by definition, bring about organisational change/transformation (for example introduction of new business processes, new computer systems, new remuneration package structures, and so on);
- For projects to be wholly successful, they must include an organisational change management component in order to ensure organisational readiness for the changes to be implemented;
- The project manager, in addition to the responsibility of leading/managing the project team, invariably plays a significant role in the change management activities of the project;
- For projects to increase their probability of success, it is therefore highly desirable for the project manager to have the characteristics of the transformational leader, as defined in this paper;
- As the paper suggests, emotional intelligence is a key characteristic of the transformational leader, and emotional intelligence can be learned; and
- Therefore, it is highly desirable to develop the project manager’s emotional intelligence, and thus increase the probability of projects’ success.

If the assumption that “coaching results in increased emotional intelligence” is valid, this paper lends weight to the anticipated outcome, namely that coaching and the coaching relationship does indeed improve an individual's ability to project manage.

## **D. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research conducted was qualitative in nature, and included quantitative statistics for illustrative purposes only. The approach was a combination of action research (coaching) and survey, and content analysis for analysis of the data. A time limit of 3 months was set for the coaching.

### **D.1 Step 1: Identify Characteristics/Competency Areas**

It was assumed that it is largely an individual's soft skills which determine his/her effectiveness as a project manager (Appendix 1 lists the characteristics/competencies identified from literature review and the author's experience as being most relevant). It was further assumed that the coaching relationship would exclude teaching of the 'hard' skills required to project manage (for example project definition and planning, risk management, change control, and so on).

### **D.2 Step 2: Conduct Pre-coaching Assessment Survey**

A questionnaire, based on the characteristics/competencies identified, was designed for the semi-structured interviews. Each project manager was asked to nominate 4 persons each (representing a 360° evaluation), as follows:

- o The project manager's line manager;
- o One peer; and
- o Two of the project manager's subordinates (who have reported to him/her for at least 6 months each).

In addition, each of the project managers was interviewed for the purposes of self-assessment.

### **D.3 Step 3: Analyse Pre-coaching Feedback**

After all of the interviews were completed, content analysis (specifically conceptual analysis) was used to identify dominant themes in each of the competency areas for each project manager, and the quantitative rating in each area was tabulated and aggregated. The analysis was used as input to the first coaching session.

#### **D.4 Step 4: Conduct 1<sup>st</sup> Coaching Sessions**

In the first coaching session, the coaching process was described to each project manager, and the need for a reflective essay (to make explicit their learning) after the 3-month period had ended was emphasized. The outcome of the survey was then communicated to each project manager, as input to the definition of the objectives which he/she would like to achieve via coaching. It was emphasized that the goal during the 3 month period is not necessarily attainment of competence, but rather improvement in each area the project manager chooses to address in coaching.

#### **D.5 Step 5: Perform On-going Coaching and Observation**

Weekly coaching sessions of 60-90 minutes each were scheduled in advance for the 3-month period with each project manager (12 sessions each). These sessions followed the typical cycle of exploration, formulation, intervention, and review and evaluation. During the 3 months, in the course of the author's other managerial responsibilities, there was ample opportunity to observe each project manager in both formal and informal meetings, in interaction with personnel and management, and generally in the performance of their responsibilities. Where behaviour relevant to their coaching objectives was observed, such observations were communicated during the coaching sessions.

#### **D.6 Step 6: Conduct Post-coaching Interviews**

After the 3-month period ended, post-coaching assessments were conducted in the form of interviews with the same people using the same questionnaire as the pre-coaching assessment. During these interviews the interviewees' memories were first refreshed with the feedback they had given during the pre-coaching interviews, and were then asked – in each characteristic/competence area – whether they had observed any changes in the project managers' behaviours.

#### **D.7 Step 7: Analyse Post-coaching Feedback**

The feedback was again analysed using content analysis, documented and tabulated in a similar manner as the pre-coaching assessment. In addition, the project managers' reflective essays were also analysed using content analysis.

#### **D.8 Step 9: Produce Research Report**

The final step was analysis of the data and production of the report. The concept of triangulation was thoroughly embodied in this project, in that analysis was performed on data from the surveys [1], from the project managers' reflective essays [2], and from the author's coaching notes and observations [3].

## **E. STATEMENT OF RESULTS**

### **E.1 Introduction**

The project managers (3 females and 2 males) who participated in this project ranged in age from 39 to 52, and all have tertiary educational qualifications.

Four of the project managers had attended a project management training course approximately 18 months prior to the commencement of this research project. Prior to the beginning of 2004, their experience of formal project management was limited. The fifth project manager had neither project management training nor experience prior to the commencement of this research project. The author's role, therefore, included mentoring and consulting, however these activities were kept distinct from the coaching activities.

On average 8 coaching sessions were held with each project manager during the project (workload and other priorities prevented the full 12 planned from being held).

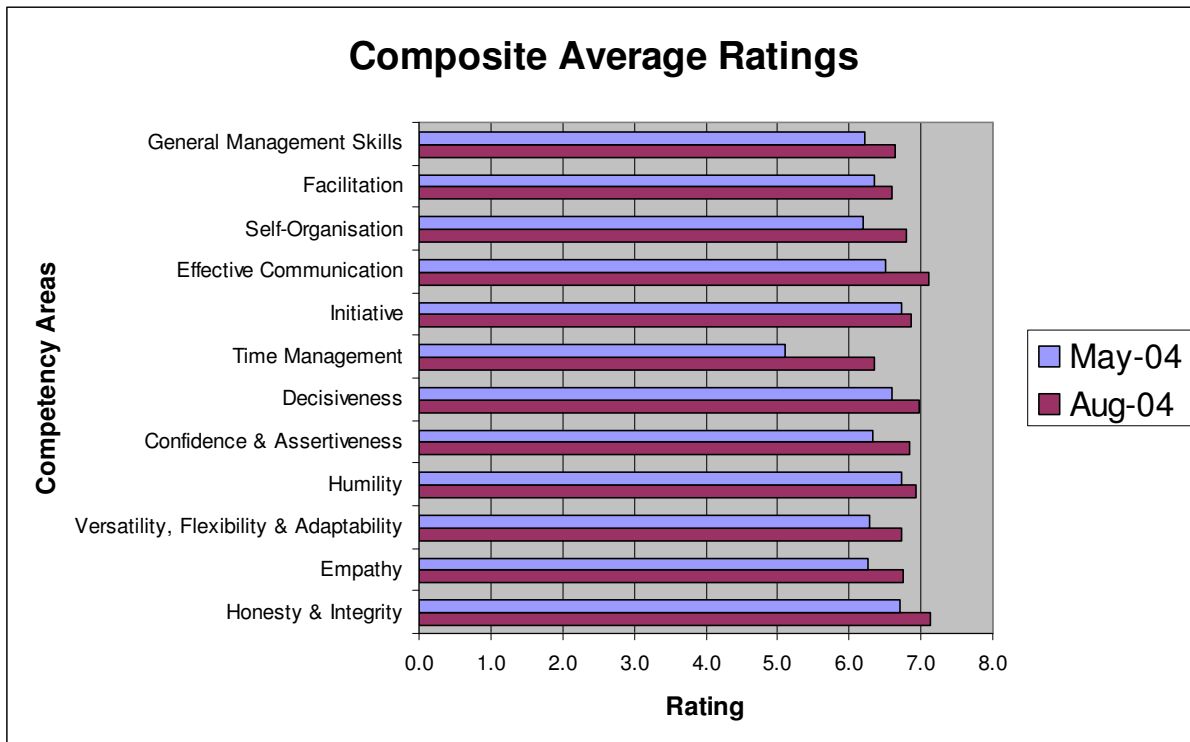
### **E.2 Coaching Objectives**

The following is a summary of all the coaching objectives set, with the number in brackets representing the number of project managers who set the same objective:

- Improved time management and self-organisation (3)
- Improved communication/listening skills (3)
- Improved delegation ability (2)
- Improved handling of personnel conflicts (1)
- Increased authenticity leading to improved relationships (1)
- Improved facilitation skills (1)
- Improved flexibility and adaptability (1).

### E.3 Research Findings (Quantitative Illustration)

The following table reflects composite, average ratings obtained from the pre- and post-coaching assessment surveys. It should be noted that these ratings are used for illustrative purposes only, and that the scale used was: 1-3 below expectations; 4-6 meets expectations; 7-9 exceeds expectations.



**Figure 1: Composite Average Ratings**

### E.4 Analysis and Discussion

As can be seen from Figure 1 above, the findings indicate an across-the-board improvement amongst all project managers. All project managers improved their effectiveness predominantly in the areas they chose to focus on in coaching (as defined by their objectives), however they also improved in the areas not specifically addressed by the coaching objectives. This is attributed to the fact that the process of coaching, which incorporates self-reflection, serves in general to heighten self-awareness, which in turn brings about either conscious or unconscious behavioural changes. Due to the restriction of 3 months for the project, the sustainability of the behaviour changes cannot be confirmed by the findings.

With reference to the expected outcomes, the findings confirm the following:

- Increased emotional intelligence, indicated by improvements in:
  - o Authenticity (honesty & integrity),
  - o Empathy,
  - o Humility, and
  - o Self-management (time, organisation);
- Improved communication skills;
- Improved self-management, indicated by improvements in:
  - o Self-organisation,
  - o Time management, and
  - o Versatility, flexibility and adaptability;
- Increased self-esteem, indicated by improvements in:
  - o Decisiveness,
  - o Initiative,
  - o Humility,
  - o Confidence & assertiveness, and
  - o Honesty & integrity;
- Improved leadership and management ability, indicated by improvements in:
  - o General management skills (leading, negotiating, problem solving, influencing, and delegating),
  - o Facilitation, and
  - o Decisiveness.

The findings show that the greatest relative improvement were in the areas most commonly set as coaching objectives, namely improved time management and self-organisation, and improved communication/listening skills.

With regard to *improved project management ability*, if one assumes that the measure of project management ability is project outcome in terms of meeting project objectives, the findings of this project would be inconclusive, as the 3-month coaching period occurred over a time when no projects were completed. The assumption made for this project, however, is not “A project manager ensures successful project outcomes by...”, but rather “A project manager *increases the probability of success* of a project by...”. The findings documented indicate increased emotional intelligence in all the project managers. If the rationale and assumptions presented above are valid,

it would be fair to extrapolate the *increased probability of success* of the projects under their management.

With regard to *improved leadership and management ability*, the expected outcomes of the research suggested that improved leadership and management ability will be demonstrated by effective teamwork (producing quality work on time). Effective teamwork was not measured by this project; instead, as a measure of improved ability in this area, characteristics/competencies surveyed were used as indicators. These were: general management skills (which include leading, negotiating, problem solving, influencing, and delegating), facilitation skills, versatility flexibility & adaptability, and initiative. As can be seen, there were improvements shown in all these areas.

With regard to *project versus general management/leadership*, it could be argued that there are no fundamental differences between the characteristics of an effective project manager/leader and that of an effective general manager/leader. If this statement is valid, and assuming that it can be concluded – based on the findings of this project – that coaching and the coaching relationship does indeed improve an individual's ability to project manage, it would be fair to suggest that coaching and the coaching relationship can also benefit a general manager/leader's ability to manage/lead.

With regard to *coaching and mentoring/consulting*, as can be seen above none of the coaching objectives focused on improving project management ability per se, they focused on improving personal effectiveness. It was necessary to make a distinction between coaching and mentoring/consulting in order for the coaching relationship to remain 'pure' and non-directive. Due to the relative inexperience of most of the project managers, mentoring/consulting was essential in order to ensure the acquisition of the required 'hard' project management skills, without which they would not be able to project manage. It was found that the combination of coaching and mentoring/consulting (performed separately) was particularly useful in enabling the project managers to increase their effectiveness.

With regard to *coaching and managing/leading*, there was a potential conflict or issue in the author's ability to both lead/manage and coach, in that management can tend to be directive, whereas coaching is – or should be – non-directive. With three of the project managers there were occasions during the coaching when they asked for direction. In all cases direction was not given, instead options were discussed and the project manager chose a course of action, thereby taking ownership and responsibility for the decision. It was found that the combined role of coach and

leader/manager in this situation was very effective. Due to the confidential nature of the coaching relationship, intimate information is shared, and as a result closeness is established between the parties, which manifests in greater mutual respect and trust. This had a positive knock-on effect on the leader/manager-subordinate relationship. It should be noted, however, that for this combination of roles to be effective, the coaching *must* be non-directive and in the best interests of the coachee.

With regard to *anticipated constraints*, the length of the project had to be limited to 3 months of coaching, and due to this constraint it was questionable whether the project could produce meaningful results. The findings of the project indicate that meaningful results were indeed produced, however the sustainability of the behaviour changes cannot be confirmed by the findings due to the 3-month restriction for the project.

With regard to the *survey*, it would have been valuable to have obtained a view from the interviewees regarding the quality of the relationship with the project managers. As noted earlier, relationship management is one of the cornerstones of emotional intelligence, and therefore 'before' and 'after' indicators in this area would have been useful.

With regard to *self-management objectives*, it is interesting that 3 of the 5 project managers defined self-management objectives (time, organisation) for their coaching. As per the survey results, all had time management and self-organisation challenges prior to the coaching, and all improved significantly as a result of the coaching. With regard to time management, it is believed that a significant part of this problem is a general lack of awareness amongst leaders/managers of the workload of their subordinates, and the absence of workload prioritisation processes. With regard to self-organisation, it seems that appropriate techniques to improve in this area are not taught either in project or general management training courses.

## **F. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **F.1 Conclusions**

The findings confirm the assumption that coaching results in increased emotional intelligence, specifically self-awareness and self-management. The research did not specifically measure social awareness and relationship management, and therefore the findings do not support increased emotional intelligence in this regard.

The findings support the expected outcomes of the project, namely that coaching results in:

- Increased emotional intelligence (self-awareness and self-management);
- Improved communication skills; and
- Increased self-esteem and esteem from others.

The research did not measure effective teamwork, and therefore the findings do not support the expected outcome of improved leadership and management ability (as demonstrated by effective teamwork). However, if improved leadership and management ability were to be measured by improved abilities in characteristics/competencies such as influencing, delegating, facilitation skills, versatility flexibility & adaptability, and initiative, then the findings support the expected outcome.

With reference to Gardner and Stough's (2001) research findings (effective leaders show transformational behaviours, and emotional intelligence correlates highly with all components of transformational leadership), and to Lowe and Kroeck's (1996) quote (transformational leaders promote greater organisational performance), the findings support the conclusion that coaching which raises emotional intelligence can improve a manager's/leader's effectiveness.

### **F.2 Recommendations**

Further study which compares project outcome in terms of meeting project objectives could prove more conclusively whether or not coaching increases a project manager's ability to project manage. Such research would need to compare the project manager's results in terms of completed projects before and after receiving coaching.

It is recommended that organisations which use project management widely should consider utilising a combination of coaching and mentoring/consulting for their project managers, as the findings of this project indicate increased probability of project success as a result. It is further recommended that corporations should institute either coaching programmes or other initiatives

with the aim of developing the emotional intelligence of its managers and leaders, so as to promote improved organisational performance.

For coaches, it is recommended that 360° evaluations of the coachees be performed once coaching goals have been set, and at a predetermined period after the commencement of coaching. This enables measurement of improvement, and possible quantification of the benefits of coaching. Furthermore, it is recommended that the coaching process includes specific reflection exercises (to make the learning explicit and to further stimulate the desired behavioural changes).

For project and general management trainers, it is recommended that techniques for self-organisation be taught as part of the training curriculum.

## G. REFERENCES

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## **APPENDIX 1: PROJECT MANAGEMENT CHARACTERISTICS/COMPETENCIES**

The selection of characteristics included in the surveys was based upon the common characteristics identified across the literature reviewed and the author's own experience of project and programme management. They are:

- Honesty & integrity:
  - Frank, sincere, truthful, free of deceit, trustworthy
  - Uncompromising adherence to a code of moral values
- Empathy:
  - The capacity for understanding and sharing another's feelings or ideas
- Versatility, flexibility & adaptability:
  - The ability to turn with ease from one thing to another; embracing or competent in a variety of subjects, fields or skills
  - Ability to adjust to new or different circumstances
  - Willing to adapt to fit in with others; capable of changing in response to new conditions
- Humility:
  - Modest, unpretentious, willing and able to identify own shortcomings, know when to ask for help
- Confidence & assertiveness:
  - Self-assurance, self-reliance
  - Self-confident and firm in dealing with others and getting one's way
- Decisiveness:
  - Willing to make decisions, ability to make clear, unambiguous decisions
- Time management:
  - Able to maintain proper balance in the use of time
- Initiative:
  - Resourcefulness displayed in being the first to act without being prompted
- Effective communication:
  - Easily understood, good listener; includes written and oral, internal and external, formal and informal, vertical and horizontal communication
- Self-organisation:
  - Well-organised and self-disciplined

- Facilitation:
  - o Facilitation (to make easier) skills; meetings and general
- Other management skills:
  - o Leading (establishing direction, aligning people, motivating and inspiring)
  - o Negotiating (confer with others with the aim of reaching agreement)
  - o Problem solving (problem definition, decision making)
  - o Influencing the organisation (getting things done, 'winning friends and influencing people')
  - o Delegating (entrust responsibilities to others).

## **APPENDIX 2: ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Saul Goldblatt is a specialist program and project manager with over 25 years' experience in the IT and consulting industries.

He commenced his career as a programmer in 1978 in South Africa, and over the years has accumulated experience in a variety of roles, most of which encompassed managerial responsibilities, and the focus of which was invariably people and project management.

His international experience includes 6 years with Deloitte Haskins & Sells Management Consultants in Hong Kong and Australia, and 3 years with IBM China/Hong Kong in the systems integration and professional services arenas. Locally, for the past 9 years he has been consulting predominantly to Sanlam, South Africa's second-largest financial services institution, to British American Tobacco, and to Stellenbosch University.

In 2000, Saul was internationally certified as a Project Management Professional with the U.S.-based Project Management Institute. He subsequently developed and presented project management training courses both through the Faculty Training Institute and directly to private organizations.

Saul has just completed his studies towards the award of a Masters degree in Professional Development (Coaching) via Middlesex University (U.K.). As part and parcel of his professional activities, he has been performing as an informal coach for many years. It is a subject which is close to his heart and a role about which he is passionate. With a focus on executive coaching, Saul assists his clients to maximize their professional efficiency and effectiveness, and in so doing to become better managers and leaders. Via the coaching process, clients' emotional intelligence is increased, with a resultant positive impact on their personal lives as well. The underlying philosophy behind Saul's coaching is to help his clients to help themselves – a path to self-empowerment.

Saul is in his mid-40's, is unmarried, and has a 9 year-old son. He is a keen sportsman and an avid golfer, and lives in Somerset West near Cape Town.

Please feel free to contact Saul with regard to any of the following services:

- General Management and Project Management:
  - o Coaching
  - o Mentoring
  - o Consulting
- Project Management:
  - o Training
  - o General Project Management Consulting
  - o Project Health Checks
  - o Project Office Setup
  - o Project Management Methodologies
  - o Project Management Maturity Assessment
  - o Project Management Information Systems