the leisure review

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Change management: fad or future-proofing?

Sport, leisure and culture are changing at a bewildering pace and managers in all sectors are feeling the pressure. Matt Fisher makes the case for project management as a way to create order out of the chaos.

Whatever your role in sport, leisure and culture, the chances are that you are expected to achieve results, get your head down and focus on driving home your targets, often in a rapidly changing environment and under increasing scrutiny. If you are fortunate you may be involved in the decisions that set out what you are expected to do and are able to control the things that may slow down, speed up or alter the quality of the results. This scenario is rare.

The UK Coaching Framework (UKCF) is a live example, where those charged with the ultimate delivery of a complex and far-reaching systemic change had first to work out how to control its implementation. 'Control' was essential for the core principles to be realised, for buy-in from stakeholders to grow and for best practice and progress to be shared. But control is hard-won and in this case entailed applying a project management approach called PRINCE2, the UK government's method of choice. Applying PRINCE2 to the implementation of the UKCF was a scenario similar to taking part in a rodeo: preparing as best you can, hopping on to a bucking bronco and hanging on for dear life. Unpicking the detail of the changes required to coaching and to sport proved too much for some but in hindsight we needed to think even bigger.

There are many tools, approaches and theories available to help, or confuse, you as you set about making things happen. Change management is the next-big-thing approach to be gaining profile but should you be rushing to get trained-up or just dust off your notes from the last big thing, possibly PRINCE2?

Project Management 101

It is generally accepted that a project is defined as something that has a clear beginning and end, is a reaction to a problem and results in clear 'deliverables' and that problem being resolved. Project management is essentially a simple cycle based on 'plan, do, review' and used to control the people, effort and tools required to achieve a defined result.

Planning: you should begin by getting some bright people together to ask questions designed to identify and crucially to agree what the real problem is and how to solve it. This will result in the identification of the all-important 'constraints' – the time, resources and scope of the project – being defined.

Doing: it is always worth checking with the people causing the problem that they accept your chosen solution before you begin to do it. Time spent telling all the people involved what, why and how you intend to change things is always time well spent. Not doing so is the most common reason for things going wrong.

Reviewing: check not only that the solution solved the problem within the defined constraints but also whether the way you made it happen could be improved. You may need to do it or something similar again.

Traditional, formal project management requires a lot of form-filling, before, during and after completion. The emphasis being that writing things down is the best method of communicating what will, is and has happened to other people. Be aware that getting things on paper is no guarantee people will not misunderstand you or that they will even read what you give them. The written word does, however, provide evidence, required all too often if things go wrong.

The Football Association's (FA) recent failed bid for the World Cup is a case in point; a very well planned and managed project to bring football's biggest prize home to England. The lessons learned from previous attempts, as well as those

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from the successful Olympics 2012 campaign, were taken into account, the brightest and best were signed up to the bid process and potential knock-backs, such as the bid leader resigning, were overcome and used as further momentum to the big build-up. Potential votes were targeted, offers and counter-offers exchanged and promises made, although these fell through in the final reckoning. However, had the FA looked more closely at past FIFA voting patterns and listened to those within their own organisation who suggested corruption was probable rather than just possible, they may not have spent quite so much on all that hoop-la.

The quality of any plan is based on your ability to predict the future, something that is notoriously difficult, so the plan is bound to change during the lifetime of the project. In all cases the thing you are trying to do cannot be completely understood and fully mapped-out in advance. The FA found this out to their cost and we all hope that Lord Triesman and the Sunday Times really do have the evidence, written or otherwise, required to make their accusations stick.

Programme management 101

Problems are rarely caused by just one thing, so if a single project deals with producing a single result and the problem still exists you may need to think bigger and consider a series of connected projects, known as a programme, to deliver a more comprehensive solution.

The basic project management principles of plan, do, and review still apply but you need to add in stages to make sure some quality thinking takes place before you spring into action. Programme management can be daunting but it builds on the practices of project management, adding the requirement to consider the sequence of the projects. How will the results impact on each other and combine to deliver the overall changes you are trying to achieve?

A live example is the "revolution" talked about by Gary Townsend of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) when presenting at the recent Leeds Metropolitan University New Directions in Sports Coaching conference. The RFU's player development model is a great example of a series of projects which have taken the governing body from design and redesign of the model itself to the subsequent piloting of adaptations to the junior game at different age categories, all of which are part of a programme of change with the potential to revolutionise the delivery of rugby.

Eighteen months in and so halfway to full implementation, the changes are advancing in some regions quicker than others, depending on the people on the ground. The evidence is pointing to a change which is being picked up at the level of coach education, although the RFU are changing their qualification structure just as fast as they can. Anticipating, tracking and managing the knock-on effects of all that delivery is dependent on excellent communication between project teams, their expertise and ultimately their clarity of purpose. Success or failure often rests on the accuracy and team-understanding of project briefs and resulting project plans. These will need to be spot on if the all important constraints are to be met and the desired aims of the programme are be realised.

Does it have to be so complicated?

The answer, of course, is no. You can ignore it all and fly by the seat of your pants, which can be exciting, but as the stakes continue to rise and resources become ever scarcer using some kind of structure is essential. Towards the end of the 1990s a move towards less onerous methodologies, dubbed 'agile' by their proponents, began to appear, primarily in software design companies. Agile methodologies, such as SCRUM and eXtreme Programming, put the emphasis on the interaction of people as part of a team empowered to own and make things happen, meeting as often as possible to identify and resolve risks and problems, acting quickly if a change is needed. This takes decision-making away from a hierarchy, reducing the toing-and-froing required to get a decision which can slow things down, and gives full responsibility to the team. While reducing the need for up-front form filling, it does still require someone to take notes as a record.

This description may well feel familiar as 'agile' management often happens organically where no tiered decision-making hierarchy exists, such as in a sports team or perhaps a smaller governing body of sport, where interaction between a few empowered and like-minded people can be almost continuous. If you can create the right conditions then proactively using such an approach can be very effective; the first hurdle will be getting the right people.

So what is change management?

These examples demonstrate in a very simplified way the development of thinking in how to control delivery and get things done. The wider the view you take in trying to identify what factors influence your objective, the greater the effort and organisation required to prepare and to control it all. Before long, whether it is a single project or a programme, the cultural, organisational and personal behaviours you will need to influence will preclude being able to just act and hope for the best. In fact if you want to be successful you need to recognise how all your interventions contribute to create a campaign; to proactively change the attitudes and behaviours of all the people involved.

Think about all the people involved in the highly successful Cricket Foundation's Chance to Shine campaign, which provides structured coaching and competition programmes for primary and secondary state schools. Now in their sixth year, the programmes, supported by professional, qualified coaches, have seen over 384,000 children in 2,100 schools take part, resulting in 18,000 boys and girls migrating from schools to clubs, and provided equipment and facility development for schools as well as training for teachers and coaches.

The principles and techniques of change management have been developed to increase the impact of your efforts. Change management builds on project and programme management principles and identifies the steps you need to take to create the right conditions so that when you finally get round to doing something it is bound not just to succeed but to stick.

So what should you do?

If this article has triggered a few memories of project management training past then it is definitely worth digging out your text book or notes to look again and see if you can use some of the tools. Fully thought-out ideas do not just pop into your head so consciously make an effort do some thinking to work out where to start and what to do next. What a formalised structure does is provide a template to push you towards thinking about certain questions to help you get to answers that help ideas coalesce.

The best advice, however, is know thyself: recognise your own preferences, how you learn, as well as how formally you like to work, and take some time to develop your own approach. Think about your experiences: if you enjoy or loath writing things down, if and how you need to share your plans, and how you solve problems along the way; essentially how you actively control and make things happen. Use the various methodologies by raiding the internet, by talking to those who have been trained or by seeking training yourself. Then keep what works for you and lose the rest.

But do have an approach. Even if you just plan and do, building in thinking time before you start and at times during an intervention, will make your project more likely to succeed. But beware: not reviewing can seem attractive, especially when you are in the thick of things, but making the same mistakes time and time again is costly. Ask the FA.

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