BEST PRACTICE

Adapting project management to suit personal styles

In this article, **Donnie MacNicol** and **Adrian Dooley** look at something that has been taken for granted for many years but may help explain why the proliferation of 'best practice' advice and guidance has made little impact on the success rate of projects, programmes and portfolios.

In 1995 Martin Cobb, from the Secretariat of the Treasury Board of Canada, articulated his now famous paradox **"We know why projects fail; we know how to prevent their failure – so why do they still fail?"**

Not everyone agrees with Cobb that we know exactly why projects fail and precisely how to prevent it - but it is certainly the case that we know enough to make success rates better. We just need to apply what we know.

Over the last twenty years, project management has become big business. Of course, projects have always been big business, but now there is a whole industry centred on 'best practice project management' as it is usually known. Whether it be certification, qualifications, training or consultancy, so much of what we do these days is influenced by 'best practice' guidance.

By 'best practice', we are referring to the many methodologies, bodies of knowledge and standards that are published by professional bodies and standards institutions from around the world. No doubt you will have come across guides such as PRINCE2 from Axelos; The 'PMBoK Guide' from the Project Management Institute (PMI®) or ISO21500 from the International Standards Organisation (ISO).

These three represent the very smallest of iceberg tips. There are dozens of such guides, all purporting to be best practice. But we all know that they really only represent the latest 'good' practice that is continuously evolving. This evolving guidance describes processes, tools and techniques which are predominantly common sense wrapped up in a formal and often off putting language of project management (when we use the term project management we also include programme and portfolio management).

Despite the proliferation of this guidance, projects are still failing at an unacceptable rate. It is our view that the evolution of good practice is now in need of a step change. This change will not be brought about by some 'revolutionary' new technique or approach such as the current drive (some would say fashion) for Agile Project Management and its many derivatives. It will be achieved through a much subtler, perhaps more obvious and fundamentally simple change – **the recognition that all people are different**.

The one thing that is common to all best practice is that it assumes we all view their content in the same way. People perceive, design, adopt, deploy on the project, practice, involve others, adapt, sustain its use, learn from and share knowledge differently. Surprisingly, these differences are not taken into account when we define good practice and how it should be practised.

The project management community has multiple tools that give us insights into how different people are motivated to work with others; provide leadership and so on. Surprisingly these differences have not been taken into account directly to help improve project management. This is the step change that is needed – **guidance that recognises the way that different people design, adopt and practice it**.

So how do we achieve this? Firstly, we need a means of identifying different personal characteristics and secondly, we need a vehicle for explaining how functions of project management, such as risk management and so on, are viewed and practised by people with different characteristics.

These tools need to be simple and readily accessible.

That is why we have combined two free online resources to support what we have named the iMAPraxis Initiative:

● **iMA™ Diagnostic** is a brief questionnaire that identifies a person's communication and engagement style.

● **Praxis Framework** is a framework for the management of projects, programmes and portfolios.

By combining these two resources we believe we can overcome the cultural, practical and commercial barriers to achieving the necessary step change. Let's look at each in turn, and then how they are put together.

iMA™ Diagnostic- Identifying Distinctions Between People

Some people who make use of these tools come away with the idea that they are being pigeon-holed into a particular type of behaviour, but such tools only indicate a preference. The reality is that as individuals we typically have a range of responses to a situation and that we work across a spectrum, often depending on the context. Being aware of your typical approach and being able to flex it as the situation and context requires is one of the key attributes of successful professionals and leaders.

We have chosen to use the iMA™ Diagnostic as it provides

a simple way to distinguish between four different colour styles, identifying their engagement and communication preferences. iMA™ stands for:

● **identify** your own or another person's colour style;

● **Modify** your approach and style to suit the context;

● **Adapt** as necessary to the response you receive.

A simple 10 question online diagnostic identifies your colour style, as shown in the figure. Everyone is a mixture of all four but iMA™ aims to identify your preferred or "High" colour styles. Each has its own typical characteristics, behaviours and preferences. You can try this any time at www.ima-pm.co.uk

Understanding the preferred colour style of different people within the project is important both in terms of what is delivered and in the way it is achieved. As an example: if the project leader is a High Red and the project sponsor a High Blue, the project leader should understand that their sponsor may see them as pushy and insensitive if all they focus on in their discussions is the delivery of outcomes without regard to the impact on people. Due to the simplicity of iMA™ it can be easily applied in coaching, team and leadership development allowing issues to be quickly addressed.

Praxis – An Integrated Framework of 'Best' Practice Guidance

All 'best practice' guides fall into one or two of four categories: **Knowledge** (e.g. the APM Body of Knowledge); **Method** (e.g. the primary focus of PRINCE2); **Competence** (e.g. the National Occupational Standards) and **Capability Maturity** (e.g. CMMI).
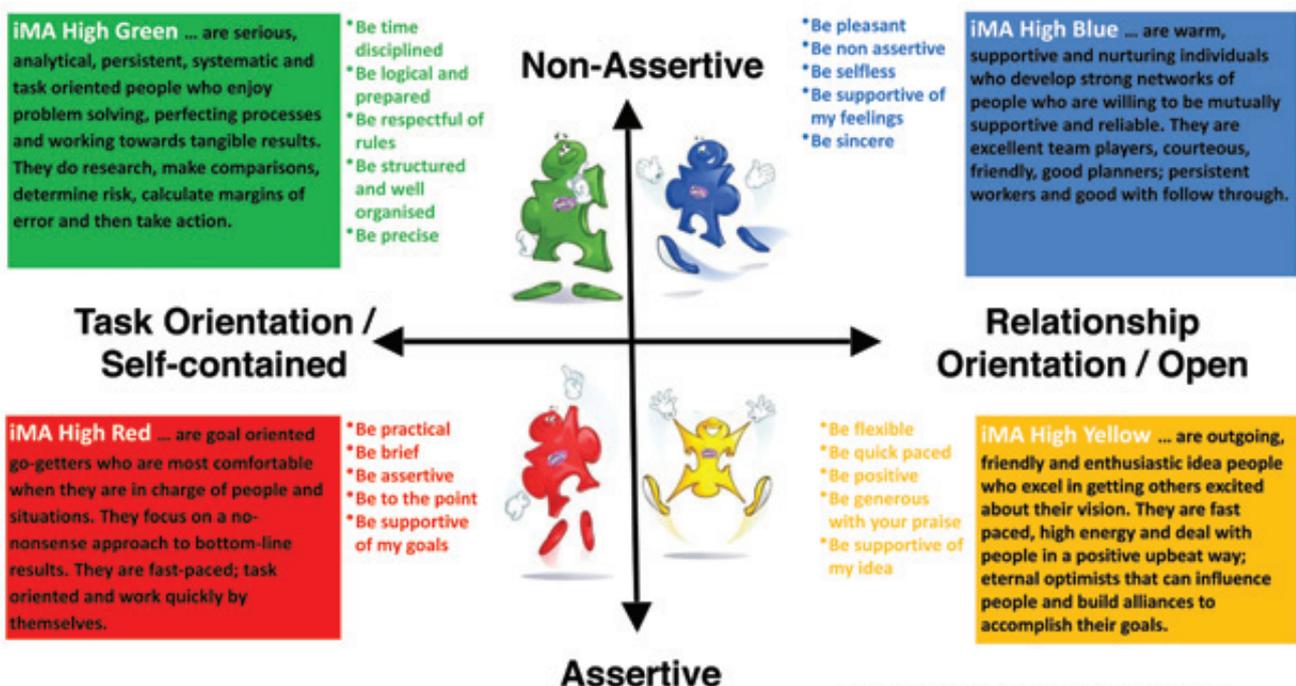
Description of iMA™ colour types. Reproduced with permission by Team Animation Ltd and iMA Strategies.

Praxis is the first approach to combine and integrate all four, and contains many supporting resources such as an encyclopaedia, glossary, articles, blogs and books.

iMAPraxis Initiative

Combining iMA and Praxis gives us the two readily accessible components we need – a simple means of identifying personal preferences and a comprehensive framework of good practice guidance.

All we have to do now is to provide the extensions and insights that demonstrate how the elements of the framework are perceived, adopted and practised in different ways by different people. This is not just about understanding your own preferred approach to a subject (such as risk management) but, more importantly, understanding that other people have different preferences to you. After all, projects are delivered by people working as a team. All the members of the team need to have an insight into each other's way of looking at things and working if they are going to be effective and successful.

Taking risk management as our example:

We know that some people are naturally risk averse and some are risk seeking; some rely on process and some prefer to be more ad-hoc; some will focus on comprehensive risk registers and others will only be interested in the headline risks. People will not only view guidance for the management of risk in different ways but they will inevitably implement that guidance in different ways. If we don't recognise and accommodate each other's perspectives, it can be disruptive.

Before we go any further, we should say that the full version of the examples below can be viewed on the Praxis web site at www.praxisframework.org/ima/risk-management . These initial examples are being used as part of a research project by the authors to determine a much more comprehensive set of personalised approaches to project management. You can get involved in this research by following the link at the end of this article. Your contribution will help develop a new type of good practice resource that will be freely available to all your colleagues in the project management profession

To date we have added personal insight pages to three Praxis knowledge functions: risk management, benefits management and stakeholder management. Each page takes the steps in the corresponding procedure and describes how the four different personal styles will focus on different aspects.

The risk management procedure comprises four steps and for each step we have described the different focus of each colour style.

Using this in practice has two elements, using Identify as an example:

1. Reflecting on your own style and strengths

Identify what you would typically propose or want to see (e.g. a High Green shown in the figure), consider if this is appropriate given the context; identify how other colour styles would tackle the same activity, ask would this approach add value and Modify as appropriate.

2. Working with others – individuals or teams

Identify your colleague's colour style, consider the implications in terms of the relationship and achieving the task, consider how other colour styles will tackle the task or deal with the situation – how this will impact you, modify as appropriate. A similar approach can be taken for entire teams.

Getting involved

This is just the starting point. To develop a comprehensive resource for all members of our profession we need feedback from individuals.

Our short survey will ask if you think these initial pages accurately reflect your attitude to the application of the different functions, knowing your iMA colour style. The survey will only ask you about your views on your own colour, so you can read about that on the Praxis page or download a pdf that only describes your colour. To complete the research (which we would be delighted to have your support with) please visit www.praxisframework.org/ima/research-sequence.

If you would like to play an active part in the initiative or follow progress then please join the iMAPraxis Initiative LinkedIn Group at www.linkedin.com/groups/12008370.

About Donnie and Adrian

As well as developing project leaders and improving team performance, Donnie is actively working with organisations to apply iMA thinking to their existing project management and project controls frameworks. Contact donnie@teamanimation.co.uk.

Adrian is the founder and lead author of the Praxis Framework. He co-ordinates the volunteers who make up the Praxis community providing content, promotion and translations. Contact adrian.dooley@praxisframework.org.