



# Costain sets the pace with its 'Project Management Academy'

by Alison Giff, Crelas

Finding skilled project managers in construction and engineering is often difficult so Costain took the decision to grow its own talent base through an innovative new PM Academy.

**E**ffective project management can be the most significant influence as to whether the project is a success or not' says Jeremy Galpin, group skills and development manager at Costain.

Given that construction and civil engineering projects often last for months or years, and that the outcome depends on the ability of the project manager to get the best from a complex web of stakeholders (including planners, designers, engineers and clients), it is no wonder that finding skilled people is a priority.

In 2007 Costain decided to grow its own talent. In conjunction with business psychologists Crelas, they created their own 'Project Management Academy'. A number of Costain's best project managers were profiled to identify the precise combination of technical knowledge, competence and behaviour that lay behind their success.

Profiling helped to pinpoint significant stages in their careers, the levels of knowledge achieved, and their behaviour, to produce a generic career progression map.

From the profiling they set clear benchmarks for behaviour, personality, motivation and cognitive ability. World class frameworks, such as the 'Schroder High Performance Leadership Framework', were used to underpin the research and subsequent benchmarks and to create a robust profile of 'what excellence looks like'.

As a result of defining the framework in 2007 there are clear goals for all participants in the academy as they move through nine levels from graduate to project director. It's all part of Costain's business strategy to 'be number one'.

Nominations to the academy have to be supported by the board and this helps to create a sense of anticipation and inspiration about the journey ahead.

New participants are first evaluated for their career aspirations, current technical abilities and project management knowledge and experience. This is followed by a rigorous assessment against newly-defined role profiles to identify learning needs, using key behaviours based on the Schroder high-performance behavioural framework – such as conceptual agility, enabling openness, forming concepts and empowering action.

Assessment tools include one-to-one interviews and 360 degree feedback and psychometric assessment. As project managers have to demonstrate leadership in highly complex environments, Costain has created a development centre to assess behaviour through a fast-moving civil emergency simulation that can reveal high performance behaviour.

Each participant creates their own personalised development plan. This includes a 'pathway trigger' to get them to the next level, and they receive regular feedback throughout the planning phase.

Particular attention is paid to help individuals unlock their existing mental model of how they operate and what needs to change to support their development. Success is measured through a variety of measures including: targeted professional (APM) qualifications; behavioural change measured by 360 degree feedback; and project level metrics, such as project profitability, customer service, quality and accident frequency rate.

The development process is tailored for each person and includes specific on-the-job assignments as well as coaching, mentoring and off-site development workshops. A full learning cycle model is used and as much emphasis is placed on behavioural development as is placed on gaining appropriate experience and technical skills.

The majority of the academy community now have a five-year career plan and the academy itself has successfully influenced the design of the succession planning process across the whole of Costain. The knowledge level of academy members, measured using the Association of Project Managers' body of knowledge scoring, has increased by 19%.

Costain is measuring the long-term impact of the academy by benchmarking project performance using a project assessment tool that is based on the EFQM model (European Foundation for Quality Management). Due to the nature of construction projects, it will take time to establish trends and impact, but Costain is confident that, combined





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with other targeted training interventions, the Academy will demonstrate a positive impact on project performance measures.

Other academy programmes run by Crelas have demonstrated that those individuals who develop the fastest, outperform their peers by as much as 20%.

ConstructionSkills, a sector skills agency for the construction industry, is a direct supporter of the academy and has described it as 'a model of best practice project management development in construction'. It has also been recognised among industry peers as an outstanding intervention, recently winning the Training Award at the Construction News Quality Awards 2009.

Costain is now using the framework to support recruitment decisions. Potential candidates for project management roles go through an individual assessment in order to assess their fit

to the academy's framework. This may include a behavioural event interview (exploring past experiences to see how they fit to the behavioural profile in the framework), as well as a suite of psychometric questionnaires, again related to the psychometric benchmarks in the framework. This new recruitment process has the potential to improve the return on investment of recruitment and selection decisions.

The Project Management Academy has helped Costain to create a successful link between recruitment, assessment, development and business outcomes. As Jeremy Galpin, says: 'Our Project Management Academy provides us with an industry leading model to accurately measure and stretch our people to reach their full potential in developing talent - identifying succession - and recruit successfully. This enables us to continue to deliver excellence for our customers'.

## Building successful, high-performing teams

**T**ucked in the courtyard to one side of the Royal Academy in London is the home of the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) and this was the historic setting for a very modern event.

As a former director of astrophysics at NASA it was a natural environment for Charlie Pellerin, but he was in London to talk about some down-to-earth problems facing teams.

It was Charlie who sent the multi-million dollar Hubble Telescope into space with a defective mirror that effectively rendered the instrument useless. The problem with the mirror had been caused by a mistake made by a technician, but compounded by a host of problems later attributed to 'leadership'.

He brilliantly led the team that repaired the telescope and was uniquely honoured by NASA for his work.

Delegates at the Project Manager Today and Human Systems event learned at first hand about the sequence of events that led to failure and the reasons why Charlie, despite being exonerated, felt he was to blame for the original failure.

He spent years looking at ways of getting project teams to perform effectively and that is now the subject of his new book: 'How NASA builds Teams'.

Project Manager Today Editor, Ken Lane, says: 'Charlie gave a fascinating account of the way in which Hubble was launched into space with a defective mirror. Leadership was at the heart of the problem and he explained how his ideas for developing high-performing teams evolved and he gave the audience a detailed insight to how they can emulate the success that NASA has seen in applying his approach'.

It was unique chance to meet and question someone associated with a world-famous project. Delegates took full advantage of the opportunity as well as leaving with signed copies of his new book.

