NEUROSCIENCE
FOR BETTER PROJECTS

Take time to understand how the human brain works – writes Carole Osterweil, Project Manager and Author of *Project Delivery, Uncertainty and Neuroscience — A Leader's Guide to Walking in Fog* — and you can enjoy higher productivity and better project outcomes with less complexity and less stress.

What do you do when people don't behave as you'd like them to? As a project manager, how do you deliver results in such a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world?

We are only human

Traditional project management has paid scant attention to human experience — dismissing it and much on the people side as 'soft and fluffy'.

The stats on project success rates tell us we've plenty of room for improvement. Figures from PMI suggest that only 52% of projects are delivered on time and just

at the messy socio-political where the vast majority of problems occur.'

Since writing *Project Delivery, Uncertainty and Neuroscience*, I've realised one of the reasons for giving socio-political issues so little attention is that we've lacked the basic building blocks.

The basic building blocks

Historically, we've asked project managers to demonstrate great leadership and people management skills without a model that is robust enough to make real sense of why people behave as they do. Imagine how an engineer would respond without a

These avoidance emotions prime us to avoid the threat through avoidance behaviours. We might become defensive, go 'on the attack', or withdraw.

5. In contrast, when the brain assesses the situation as 'safe' it will generate approach emotions including trust, excitement, joy and love. These emotions are a pre-requisite for successful project delivery. They enable approach behaviours such as collaboration, creative problem solving and rational decision making.
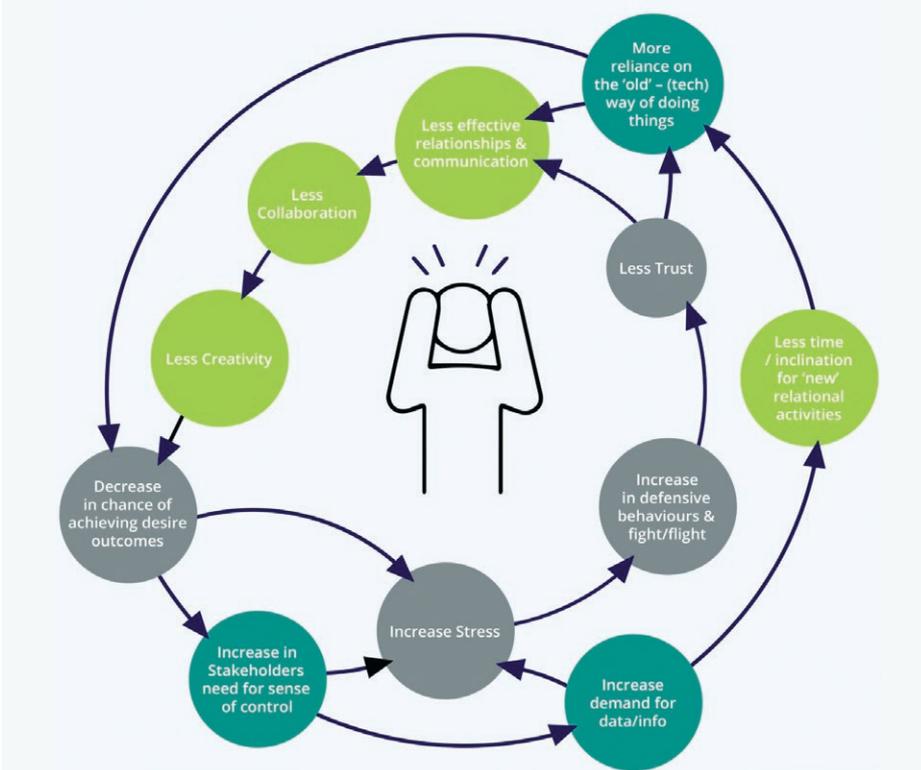
You don't need me to tell you, it's impossible to deliver a successful IT project without high levels of collaboration and creativity. Understanding how the human brain works gets us beyond the soft and fluffy. It provides the missing building blocks and gives the most process-driven project managers insight into why people behave as they do. It has profound implications for everyone involved in IT projects.

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69% meet their goals and business intent[1]. In the UK, a report into major government projects observes that less than 50% have a green or green/amber rating[2]. The case for paying attention to the people-side of projects becomes even stronger when we add in recent research into wellbeing and stress levels amongst project professionals[3].

One of my colleagues, Stephen Carver at Cranfield University, cites a survey of 250 project professionals: 70% of respondents said socio-political factors (i.e. things to do with relationships, personalities and behaviours under stress) cause them the most trouble on live projects. Yet, this was the focus of only 10% of their training[4].

Carver also speaks about being 'constantly amazed at how much time, effort and money is thrown at structural issues (time, pace, scope etc) and how little

grasp of the laws of physics, or a linguist without grammar. With recent advances in neuroscience, things have changed.

Employ a little neuroscience

We are used to the idea of the brain's fight/flight/freeze response in the face of physical threat. We are far less familiar with the idea that our brain responds to social threat in exactly the same way.

Five basics to know about the brain:

1. The brain is hardwired for survival.
2. The human brain responds to social threat in the same way as it does to physical threat — it tries to avoid it.
3. In judging whether a situation is threatening, the brain trusts past experience above all else.
4. In response to social threat, the brain generates avoidance emotions (e.g. fear, anxiety, anger and shame).

How does knowing about the brain help with delivery?

I'll give you one common example: change requests. Stakeholders changing their minds can be exasperating — especially when you think you've finally tied everything down! Everyone in the IT world recognises the risk of scope creep. Far fewer recognise that their response to a change request is important, too.

When a stakeholder changes their mind, it is crucial you don't let it wind you up. Handle it wrong and you can trigger a stress cycle that adds layers of complexity.

The project stress cycle Source: *Project Delivery, Uncertainty and Neuroscience — A Leader's Guide to Walking in Fog*

it becomes far more difficult to achieve successful project outcomes.

The Six Point Plan
It's not enough to keep an eye on the standard KPIs and metrics. You also need to:

1. Press the pause button and look beyond things you routinely focus on (tasks/ activities/ risks/ finances, etc.)
2. Take stock of how individuals (including you) are behaving.
3. Consider how project boards and project teams are behaving too.
4. Look out for patterns and signs of excess stress.

If you suspect a stress cycle at work:
5. Name it — with the intention of checking out whether others can see it too.
6. Use the project stress cycle diagram, or the story of Fred to test the ground.

You'll be amazed at how quickly things can shift once you've got a way to describe what is really going on!

What is a project stress cycle?

Picture Fred, a senior project team member. Things are not going his way. He's getting increasingly frazzled.

He is holding it together but doesn't realise how stressed he is; he is snapping at everyone and finding it harder to act in a rational manner. The impact on those around him is palpable: no one wants to provoke an outburst, so they give him a wide berth. Trust is falling across the piece and relationships and communication are suffering.

When the project started, Fred and his colleagues went out of their way to highlight the need to invest time in building relationships and ensuring people worked well together. They repeatedly reminded the team 'successful delivery relies on collaboration and creativity'.

But now the pressure is on and metrics are the primary focus. As relationships get strained, collaboration is more difficult. Rather than wasting time struggling to work together, people are falling back into old habits and old silos. They are relying on approaches that worked in the past. And the word on the street? The project is unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes – which does nothing for stress levels.

Powerful stakeholders are getting nervous. They are demanding more and more information in slightly different

formats to reassure themselves that things are under control. These demands distract the team from the work they should be doing and add to the stress.

They have less time and inclination to work collaboratively and the preoccupation with spreadsheets and metrics is forcing them to adopt behaviours that reduce the chance of success and multiply stress, right across the system.

In telling this story, I have illustrated how one person's response to a change request can increase the complexity of delivery. Yet this is a simplification: real life involves many stakeholders and many responses to a single change request — not all of them proportionate or rational.

I'm not suggesting that stress is a bad thing — a little goes a long way. (I don't know about you, but I'm suspicious of dashboards that only show green flags).

What can we learn?

We are all human. When we are stressed or upset, we find it harder to regulate our emotions and to think clearly. We are more likely to perceive things as socially threatening and to respond accordingly. This can lead to a chain reaction — a 'project stress cycle' — that amplifies stress levels and sets hares running.

Once a stress cycle is triggered, things can spiral quickly. Productivity suffers and

References

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About the author

Carole Osterweil is a Transformation Troubleshooter, Coach and Author of Project Delivery, Uncertainty and Neuroscience — A Leader's Guide to Walking in Fog. To find out more about her work, visit **www.visibledynamics.co.uk.**