

On the way home from Conference.....

***This thought
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All too often we hear about the failures that beset the project and programme profession. I came away from the APM Conference 2012 with a genuine sense of pride and optimism. Why? Because during the course of the Conference it became apparent that the PPM profession was doing some incredible things, and much of it very successfully: Crossrail, Bloodhound, 2012 Olympics, TV Switchover, Virgin Galactic to name a few highlights of the day - all quite remarkable undertakings, and all of them with high levels of 'success'. But I also came away feeling that many organisations were somehow missing a real opportunity around what was a key theme of the day for me: building community of practice. The concept of community was referenced in every presentation that I attended and its importance was made very clear in the context of rising to the challenges associated with projects and programmes, both now, but more importantly in the future.

Some references were more obvious than others. The opening speaker of the Conference was Ed Hoffman, Chief Knowledge Officer at NASA. He shared his views on the community enabled and shaped by social media. Knowledge, he argued, was a 'community challenge' based on interaction, communication and learning – all of which were now intrinsically linked to the use of social media. As he was speaking, I noticed that many at Conference – including myself - were tweeting away. Case proved. By the way, in opening the Conference, Dr Hoffman showed a YouTube video clip in which success for some young Americans, it would appear, is defined as 'decreasing suck, increasing awesome'!

The closing speaker of the Conference was 'serial social entrepreneur' Lord Andrew Mawson OBE. He described his work in East London, where as a young clergy man (30 years ago) he helped set up a number of community projects – child care, art gallery, coffee shop, garden centre – all of which became forerunners to 'One Church 100 Uses' and 'Community Action Network' and the award of a life peerage in 2007 in recognition of the social impact of his work.

During the day, the theme of community appeared in a number of different guises. In a presentation given by Caroline Blackman of Laing O’Rourke, we heard of the fantastic work that was done over a very short period to build what was to become the Olympic Delivery Partner, CLM. You’ll be aware that CLM was formed by the coming together of three contractors: CH2MHill, Laing O’Rourke and Mace. CLM were able to quickly establish a single identity that led to a successful award by ODA in September 2006. This success, we were told, was due in no small part to a collective focus on values and culture and ‘behavioural rigour’, a process of setting clear guidelines and the use of charters to promote engagement within the workforce. Simon Wright, speaking on behalf of the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) described the challenges that 2012 faced, and overcome, in delivering the Olympic sports stadia, infrastructure and legacy. The discipline and rigour around project and programme management was very evident: early emphasis on integrated planning, monthly risk boards, robust (even ruthless) change control process, clear roles and responsibilities and so on. But Simon also made very clear the importance of the relationship between ODA acting as an ‘Intelligent Client’ and CLM as the private sector ‘getting on a doing the work’; at the end of the day, to be successful, it had to be a ‘team game’ where both ‘the heart and the head’ were fully engaged. Mark Butler, Senior Program Manager with Virgin Galactic, gave a fascinating insight into the work going in New Mexico to prepare and launch the world’s first commercial Spaceport. The importance of community was clear – whether it was in the context of building the customer base (over 500 people have signed up and are preparing for a space flight at a cost of \$250k each) or spearheading the building of a new team of diverse employees from across the business, and new hires in the area.

Now, ‘community’ itself is clearly not a new concept. The need to socialise and work with others is a natural aspect of human behaviour. However, I’m particularly interested in how organisations build Communities of Practice (CoP) – defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in an area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, 2002). There are three essential pre-requisite characteristics of a CoP:

1. A shared domain of interest with commitment to the domain;
2. A community where members of a specific domain interact and engage in shared activities; and
3. A practice, with members that are practitioners, who develop a shared repertoire of resources.

Project-based environments share many of these features, but I do wonder to what extent we take advantage of the opportunity to build genuine communities. Projects after all should be learning organisations or learning places. Perhaps it is not the idea of community that is new, but the need for organisations to become more intentional and systematic about managing knowledge through exploitation of the idea of community.