Academic Paper

The power of pragmatism: how project managers benefit from coaching practice through developing soft skills and self-confidence

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Abstract

My instinct as practitioner, a project manager and a coach, originated the idea of using coaching practice to develop project managers' soft skills: an empirical, pragmatic suggestion where soft skills needs and ideal development methods lack clear definition. The academic aim was to understand the benefits of coaching to the coach, using project manager participants and an action research methodology. Interpretivist data analysis was originally planned, but the findings eventually emerged using pragmatism and abduction: focusing upon perceived personal growth of the project managers acting as coaches, learned and applied soft skills and aspirations to be more supportive or collaborative with colleagues.

Introduction

There were two rationales for this research. Firstly, there is a lack of literature on the benefits of coaching to the coach. Secondly, project managers need soft skills and there is no recognised development route for them (Kilkelly, 2011). Regarding the first issue, several authors (Mukherjee, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh and Tong, 2013; Ammentorp and Kofoed, 2010) developed studies that do show interest in the benefits to coaches beyond the learning of coach skills. They evidence that self-confidence, self-efficacy and relationships with others can be improved. Despite the general lack of attention to coaching's benefit to the coach, simple observation within the coaching profession shows coaches, trainers and supervisors aim to develop the competencies of coaches over time. These competencies embrace soft skills (Maltbia, Marsick and Ghosh, 2014) including personal skills, such as reflexivity and decision-making, that could be useful to anyone. Regarding project managers, the human element of project management has become increasingly important

based on increasing complexity (Azim et al, 2010), the resultant need for collaborative learning within the project team (Ramazani and Jergeas, 2015) and negotiation with stakeholders (Saunders et al, 2015).

I was personally interested in both rationales for the research. I believe coaching skills have helped me to change my behaviour as a project manager, so I believe others may benefit. Apart from the skills advantage, I consider that a coach has a better insight to coaching that is advantageous when they are coached; they may also be exposed to more coaching than non-coaches. As a coach, I also believe I have the benefits of understanding of coaching to be better ready for coaching. This readiness enables understanding of the contracting conversation, supporting mutual trust to be established, which is so important to coaching; Garvey, Stokes and Megginson (2014) suggest trust reflects the openness that is possible in a coaching relationship. Potentially, the coachee is at a potential disadvantage in any coaching relationship not having the knowledge to negotiate well. Equally, my strong value of fairness may also drive my interest.

At the outset, I had little appreciation of research philosophy, such that 'research findings must be understood from the gaze of the writer' (Garvey, et al, 2014, p4). Hindsight suggests I believed there was a right choice of philosophy for a research question, reflecting my positivist roots as an engineer and project manager. The study was initiated from the pragmatic perspective that project managers need some practical developmental support for soft skills and coaching embraces potentially useful soft skills. Because soft skills lack clear definition (Hurrell et al, 2013) qualitative research using interpretative data analysis seemed appropriate to explore their understood meaning by project managers. This aligned with similar postmodernist approaches my fellow doctoral students were using. Yet, as the project progressed, pragmatism emerged as the underpinning research approach and, I recognise the power in having consistency for clearer understanding of the findings. I hope this article will help others to build confidence in their personal gaze from the outset, as well as to consider benefits of coaching to the coach.

This article focuses on the philosophical approach used in this participatory action research study, but also summarises the findings and gives suggestions for further research. He planning section relates the literature and methodological choices. The flying the plane section relates the execution of the action research study and its challenges. The final section reflects on the findings, implications and use of pragmatism.

Literature

The project management literature shows recognition of the need for soft skills and the benefits of a pragmatist approach which can recognise complex social processes, despite a traditionally positivist perspective (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, and Hodgson, 2006). PMI (2018) offers this definition of project managers as: 'change agents: they make project goals their own and use their skills and expertise to inspire a sense of shared purpose within the project team'. According to APM (2018), a project manager is accountable for the success or failure of a project; where a project is a unique, transient endeavour, undertaken to achieve planned objectives, which could be defined in terms of outputs, outcomes or benefits. There is criticism of such professional organisations because they fail to explain the soft skills necessary: for example, the PMBOK Guide 5th edition (PMI, 2013) first introduced an appendix to only briefly list interpersonal skills. There is research interest in identifying the soft skills needed by project managers, but lists can be long and inconsistent (Brill et al, 2006; Stevenson and Starkweather, 2010; Ahsan, Ho and Khan, 2013). Communication emerges as an important need throughout a project's lifecycle (Skulmoski and Hartman, 2010). Leadership is also important, but often does not elucidate the soft skills needed (Clarke, 2012; Awan, Ahmed and Zulqarnain, 2015).

Although universities are planning to incorporate more soft skills learning within project-management-related courses (Alam, Gale, Brown and Khan, 2010; Shelley, 2015), organisations may be more interested in hiring project managers with soft skills rather than developing skills (El Sabaa, 2011). Project manager development is haphazard (Darrell, Baccarini and Love, 2010; Turner, Keegan and Crawford, 2000) and needs can be ignored (Clott, 2007). Self-responsibility can be encouraged (Marion, Richardson and Earnhardt, 2014) and continual personal development (Ramazani and Jergeas, 2015) with coaching and mentoring, recommended (Bourne and Walker, 2004; Hans and Rwelamila, 2012).

In the general soft-skills literature there is criticism of the lack of clarity of skills, particularly that they confuse skills with personal traits and attitudes (Hurrell et al, 2013, Claxton, Costa and Kallick, 2016). There are many studies with student participants that show universities face a range of soft-skills requirements across different disciplines exacerbated by the lack of clarity and different views of requirements by stakeholders (Chowdhury and Miah, 2016; Jiang and Alexakis, 2017). National policy may be helpful: Chowdhury and Miah (2016) used UK policy, Oliveri and Markle (2017) used US policy. Yet, policy lists' individual skills still need explanation of meaning. A definition for soft skills was created by combining those of Hurrell et al (2013) and Yeardley: soft skills develop over time, with practice; involve cognitive processes, manipulation of knowledge and an element of discretion in relation to effective and productive interpersonal interactions. This definition supports the inclusion of thinking skills and managing oneself appropriately in these interactions. Development of soft skills is challenging because trainers need to be skilled (Subramaniam, 2013; Tang, 2018), real practice is needed (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016), with feedback (Grossman, Thayer, Shuffler, Burke and Salas, 2015) and multiple approaches exist that are not guaranteed to meet required outcomes (Culpin and Scott, 2011; Dewiyani, 2015).

In comparison with general soft skills, coaching skills are clearer. Based on the International Coaching Federation, ICF's coach competencies, coaches are expected to develop skills that involve communication, relationship-building and facilitation (Maltbia et al, 2014). The following coaching definition uses a small adaptation to the ICF definition: 'coaching practice is the partnering with coachees in a thought-provoking and creative process that supports the coachees to achieve more professionally'. Managerial coaching was chosen as the most appropriate coaching genre to consider for project managers because it includes team-coaching, peer coaching and cross-organisational coaching (Beattie, Kim, Hagen, Egan, Ellinger and Hamlin, 2014), which could be useful to project managers. Managerial coaching can be seen as goal-focused conversations (Grant, 2017) and can also represent intended outcomes: facilitating learning (Bommelje, 2015), employee wellness (Ismail, Ahmad and Zainol, 2016), building a world-class workforce (Chong, Yuen, Tan, Zarim and Hamid, 2016) and empowerment (Ellinger, Keller, and Baş, 2010).

There is debate about the exact meaning of managerial coaching (Lawrence, 2017), to what extent it includes control (Katsikea, Theodosiou and Morgan, 2015) and its training needs (Rock and Donde, 2008). There is variance in the extent managers coach (Hunt and Weintraub, 2010) and receive coach training (McCarthy and Milner, 2013). For those who favour employees being supported to develop, coaching can be seen as a way of managing (Garvey et al, 2014). However, a case can be made for internal coaches to focus on development (St John-Brooks, 2018), and managers to focus on team performance.

Methodology

The outline plan was that project managers, after one-day coach training, facilitated six coaching sessions with a previously unknown coachee. Data from interviews would capture their soft skills learning and any changes to soft skills used at work. Based on this intention to engage project managers in coaching practice for their skills development, I chose an action research

methodology because it involves 'improvement of practice, understanding of practice, [and] improvement of situation' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p199). Pragmatically, my choice of research philosophy came second, likely reflecting a scientific background. Positivism had been clear from my vocabulary when communicating (using words like correlate, evaluate), yet I aspired to engage in the postmodernist perspective apparently considered more appropriate for social research.

I therefore proposed to mix pragmatism and interpretivism, taking comfort that others had mixed such philosophies (Goldkuhl, 2012). Using coaching practice as research action to explore it as a development method for project managers aligned with pragmatism ideas that 'all human concepts are defined by their consequences' and 'truth is embodied in a practical outcome' (Baskerville and Myers, 2004, p331). If learned skills were applied by project managers in their job role, this signified the usefulness of their learning, a practical truth. Interpretivism supported my desire to not use my personal experience to influence the participants; I wanted to build their perceptions and understandings (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) of the soft skills learning into a thematic model. My literature view could highlight coaching skills and the soft skills project managers needed; the data would emphasise what skills project managers felt were important.

As a student of coaching, it felt important to contribute to understanding the benefits of coaching to the coach. Leggett and James (2016) highlight how difficult this can be when coach training is designed to include coach practice, because for example, 'a deeper awareness and empathy with the coachee perspective' (p.57) results. Their study with alumni of a coach development programme, recognised useful skills beyond coaching, contributing to management effectiveness. However, the details of the coaching programme which incorporated peer coaching and other reflective discourse is not given. Coaches may learn from both being coached, personal reflection and the coaching practice. Similarly, coaches learn from coach supervision (Hawkins, 2012). This study aimed to ensure that there was no coaching or coach supervision beyond the initial one-day coach training where participants would coach each other in practical sessions as novice coaches and potentially be given feedback by the trainer.

Because coaching action by project managers had to take place for the research, action research seemed an appropriate research methodology, especially with its inherent flexibility, which Herr and Anderson (2005) call 'designing the plane while flying it' (p69). I had only my own experience and the enthusiasm of the participants to predict whether the project managers would manage to complete the action. I chose participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2006), because the participants were taking the action and the methodology would allow me to encourage participants to share practice, but I would remain an 'outsider' to the research (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011, p8), as facilitator.

Flying the plane

The project manager participants would have to invest a significant amount of time to participate, so I chose to invite established project managers without previous coaching experience to act as the coaches, so that they would be more likely to perceive value from developing coaching skills. The one-day experiential workshop aimed to give each project manager, 'coach participant', the skills and confidence to coach another project manager, a 'coachee participant', for six coaching sessions over six months. Seven coach participants attended the workshop. An equivalent number of coachee participants were also recruited. Each coach and coachee pair were introduced using a virtual conferencing call. Prior to the introduction, the coach and coachee participants had never met, but the coachee participants were familiar with coaching and being coached. The coach participants were responsible for contracting the coaching relationship and running the coaching sessions. The coachee participants did not contribute to the research data, though did give feedback to the researcher on whether they felt they were coached in the sessions.

In essence, I was leading a project with a team of project managers which was well within my comfort zone. Typical of any project, the concept was unique, and thus a learning opportunity for both researcher and participants no matter what the research outcome. Because of the risks to success, such as losing participants, because there was no apparent value, or the coaching practice was too hard, I took comfort in the flexibility of action research (Herr and Anderson, 2005) to support my belief in the experiential learning potential.

The action research plan, which had been shared with the participants on the training day, showed two action cycles with a focus group marking the end of the first cycle, as shown in figure 1. Action cycle one covered the first three months in which three interviews took place. Action cycle two covered the second three months which only included a final interview at the end. A focus group marked the transition from a focus on coaching practice to a focus on the participants' work environment. This intentionally aimed to support participants to consider what was changing at work; Reason and Bradbury (2006) advocate establishing an orientation of change with others and giving opportunities for reflection. I focused on the participatory nature of the methodology and collecting the data. Interviews were completed after each of the first three coaching sessions, approximately monthly, and after all coaching was completed, after six months. After each of the first two interviews, I summarised the soft skills mentioned by each participant, as a secretary might write minutes of a meeting, and emailed these to the coach participants. After the third set, I prepared a list of soft skills to use in the focus group which would finalise the list. This skills list was made available for reflection and simple personal scoring (on a scale of 1-10) before and after coaching practice, in preparation for the final round of interviews.

Figure 1: The action research process.
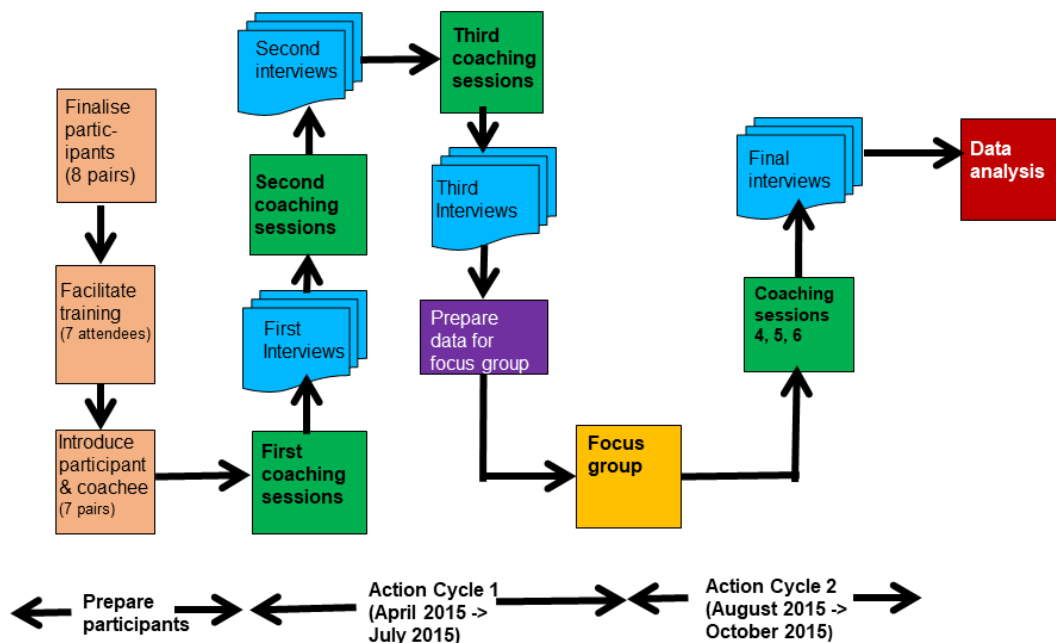
The six months of interviewing was an opportunity for some reflection. I became increasingly aware of my positivist desire to do things *right*, which drew me towards mixed methods popular with action research (Bryman, 2016). Could my soft skills list be classed as quantitative data? Could I ask a higher number of project managers to assess their soft skills? Yet, I focused on facilitating the action, realising I still had to do thematic data analysis. (Later experiments with one questionnaire about soft skills did not work well.) It was also a hectic period with interviews and their transcription. Two challenges were addressed. One coachee participant wanted to exit the process, so an eighth coachee was substituted. One coach participant became ill and coaching practice had to stop,

though there was some coaching practice with a colleague instead, on return to work. (I provided the rest of the promised sessions to the coachee outside of the research.) I took comfort that I was being pragmatic to ensure appropriate action to support data collection. Yet, how would the soft skills list relate to thematic data analysis being done after the action? Additionally, not all participants scored the skills, which possibly reflected that the list was not a good representation, despite being a useful reference for the final interviews.

A spiral of learning and change is considered a characteristic of action research (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, and Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). I had some worries as research facilitator that the only change I was conceivably making was to create an increased expectation in the third interviews and focus group that participants would notice changes at work, if any. The emailed list of soft skills evolved, but more importantly the spiral of learning related to the participants' changing soft skills. Though participants were likely modifying their skills over the six coaching sessions, there was no visibility of specific changes, other than within the collected data from interviews. Though the learning journeys were individual, similar changes in behaviour were seen for participants at work.

Data analysis ultimately provided the prompt for full adoption of pragmatism because thematic analysis using the Braun and Clarke (2006) method would not provide stable themes, after protracted attempts. Deduction and abduction ultimately provided resolution. Soft skill themes from the literature were deductively used as organising themes from the Attride-Stirling (2001) method. Abduction explained the 'ah ha' moment when studying soft skill taxonomies in the literature. According to Peirce (1992), another of the original American pragmatists, suggests 'abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash [,an] act of insight' (p227). While reading Pichler and Beenen (2014), it occurred to me that coaching skills, like leadership skills, are combinations of other skills such as self-management and communications. Also, Klein, DeRouin and Salas (2006) suggest that interpersonal skills are communications and relationship-building skills. I separated the data categories for learned soft skills in coaching practice from applied soft skills at work. I introduced self-management, communications and relationship-building as organising themes for learned skills, which brought stability and also identified a fourth theme, supportive skills that represented project managers' descriptions of coaching skills, as shown in the bottom row of figure 2. Deduction and abduction had apparently been powerful; in addition, data was more easily interpreted in relation to existing taxonomies. More importantly perhaps, a better understanding emerged of the recognised linkages between the areas of communications and relationship-building: rapport, focussed attention and trust. This potentially explains the challenge in stabilising themes.

A slightly different set of organising themes was used for applied soft skills in line with the data: personal skills, communication skills, relationship-building skills and collaborating skills. Again, using deduction and abduction, it became apparent project managers became more supportive and collaborative with colleagues, as a result of coaching practice. The themes for applied skills are shown in the top row of figure 2.

Figure 2: Themes from data analysis

	Self–management & personal skills	Communication skills	Relationship-building skills	Supporting & collaborating skills
Applied learning (mostly work goals)	Increased capacity / Increased confidence	Listening to hear more / Questioning to understand	Inviting contribution / Inviting agreement	Facilitating work goals / Letting others drive / Coaching
Learned skills and outcomes in coach practice (coachee goals)	You cannot do anything else but focus / [Cope as coach] out of comfort zone	Listening on purpose with attention / Questioning more using open probing questions	Achieving rapport / Negotiating agreement	Stepping back / Sensing direction

The power of pragmatism, and its roots in collaborative enquiry had become clear. Morgan (2014) describes how John Dewey's approach aligns with participatory action research. Pasmore (2001) also explains the independent originators of action research, Collier and Lewin, needed to use collaboration to find acceptable solutions in their work. The idea that knowledge is conceived as action and its practical consequences seems especially useful for soft skills, because they related to how something is done, thus dependent on the context of use. Collective agreement about knowledge for social groups is promoted by Dewey (1999). According to William James, cooperation can also help individuals to shape their own fate and truth, (Bjorkman, 1907). Kolb (2014) writes that James' ideas underpin the theory of experiential learning. This creation of a collective view from my participants was facilitated using induction, deduction and abduction, reinforcing full adoption of pragmatism.

5.0 Looking back and to the future

It had felt achievable for project managers to help to build a thematic model of their learned and applied soft skills, from an interpretivist perspective. Yet, soft skills are little understood, and the participants had to learn to coach as an indirect route to soft skill. Despite coaching feeling challenging, project managers easily adapted learned coach skills for work. However, they found it difficult to talk about soft skills separately from coaching techniques. It is perhaps not surprising that combinations of skills were hard to separate because coaching takes advantage of their integration. In focusing on action, action research supported me to remain flexible about philosophy, but pragmatism certainly allowed me to overcome data analysis challenges and a more neutral position on what might be useful. I now have more understanding of my research gaze. The centrist position of pragmatism (Fishman, 1999) balanced my breadth of view as a student: the desire to experiment with postmodernism yet having an ingrained principle that academic study should contribute to theoretical understanding, but pragmatism, like action research, also focuses on what happens in practice. My preference for doing, and experience as both project manager and coach suggests my gaze leans towards mixed methods or pragmatic case study.

It is encouraging that Bachkirova and Borrington (2018) suggests the meta-philosophy positioning of pragmatism enables organisational coaching to embrace many different theoretical

underpinnings and voices, and encourages more sharing of ideas. The potential result though is that pragmatism represents ongoing enquiry. This study has shown what was true for seven managers in separate contexts, after each undergoing one training workshop and six coaching sessions with a previously-unknown coachee. At work, in a non-coaching environment, they applied useful soft skills learning and recognised resultant personal growth. This may not be generalisable, but contributions to both coaching and project management disciplines are claimed.

For coaching, the study highlights that coach skills are useful soft skills outside of coaching. Thus, anyone privileged to receive coach training and encouragement to practice has the potential to collaborate more effectively in any situation. There is also the potential that individuals who learn to act as coach reflect more and coach themselves. The findings align with other studies on the benefits of coaching to the coach in that the coach gains in self-confidence and self-efficacy (van Nieuwerburgh and Tong, 2013; Ammentorp and Kofoed, 2010), to some extent in leadership skills (Mukherjee, 2012). The findings also align with the view that coaching is a means to an end (Hawkins, 2012) because project managers showed different intentions to work differently with colleagues with a focus on work goals when using the skills. Study into how much training and coach practice are actually needed to effect the same changes is now possible. Also, an implication for coaching cultures is to consider how coach training for any employee may result in improve soft skills and collaboration more widely. Research could be done in coaching cultures on who receives coach training and compare collaboration skills expertise, thus identify those with untapped improvement potential.

For coaching managers, the study suggests that a change of intention in everyday interactions with staff is a fundamental difference to non-coaching managers. This aligns with views that managerial coaching is about how managers manage (Ellinger et al, 2010; Garvey et al, 2014). Intentions potentially reflect a coaching philosophy to be supportive or collaborative, and use of learned skills at work being bounded by work goals, with coaching likely to be restricted to those delegated to. Project managers found benefits in being more supportive to team members, such as hearing more information. They then began to be more assertive about who was responsible for finding solutions to specific issues. This encouragement to empower others was considered to raise team buy-in and happiness, especially when the team contributed more or took on more responsibility. These ideas seem to reflect a step towards coaching philosophy where the coaching agenda is set by the coachee which infers coachee choice and self-responsibility (Rogers, 2008). Only two of the seven project mana were actively coaching at work; their coaching conversations were about delegated tasks. Research to compare this finding to situations in which managers typically coach could be interesting.

For project managers, the study shows that coaching practice can provide principles, skills and tools which put more focus on people, rather than just task; this is a key priority for project managers (Dalcher, 2016). Personally, project managers can feel more confident in having the coaching skills in their tool-bag; can feel more like a leader, and more objective in their thinking. With others, project managers can realise that giving people time and space to communicate in more depth can be helpful. Although there is an investment of time in the short term, this may contribute to team happiness and effectiveness in the longer term. Learning to empower others can also lead to effective delegation and coaching of others for their development.in delegated tasks. Having identified empowerment and delegation are enabled through learning to act as coach, further research could study more closely these specific outcomes and particularly the training managers actually need to support these outcomes.

For anyone, this study is suggesting coaching practice as a practical development approach for soft skills, particularly to build supportive and collaborative skills, because coaching philosophy sets intentions for shared intention to collaborate on the coachee's agenda (Rogers, 2008). Project managers showed that the learned skills focus attention on listening to another person's agenda, and elicitation of further thoughts and feelings. The outcome of skills is a different relationship which potentially has more trust and agreement; trust is essential in coaching (Rogers, 2008) and

both trust and agreement may be key to collaboration. This development approach is beneficial because training is not difficult; indeed, managers' training can be minimal or self-taught (McCarthy and Milner, 2013). Project managers showed that the difficulties were more related to the content of coaching conversations than the use of skills. Further study is necessary to look at the sustainability of the skills and how an organisational culture may support or hinder the skills development and usage.

From this research, I and the participants have a better understanding of the soft skills that can be developed through coaching practice. An important learning is the flexibility of choice in how to use soft skills, rather than assuming soft skills are role-dependent. In different situations people will use soft skills differently: for example, collaboration is based on trust and implies shared intention (Bratman, 2009). Soft skills are not measurable so quantitative methods are challenging, though scoring of soft skills was a crude attempt to quantify. The outcomes of changed soft skills at work may provide better measurable options than the soft skills themselves. For myself, the idea of shared intention in collaboration has reinforced the importance of coachee readiness.

Pragmatism is a philosophy for seeing hope as luck (Rorty, 1999) and there certainly was hope behind the research idea. The study has explored a guess of what might be useful and aimed to explore the practical benefit of very little coaching practice. I acted pragmatically and used participatory action research to support experiential learning. Regarding the original aims of adding to the literature on the benefits of coaching to the coach and project managers not having a recognised development approach for soft-skills, seven project managers demonstrated value to themselves in learning to act as coach, the specifically-learned skills and how they were used. I have since seen other project managers similarly benefit. The philosophy of pragmatism has underpinned the findings throughout.

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