

WHY PROJECT MANAGEMENT TRAINING DOESN'T WORK - AND WHAT DOES

The project management training industry is big money and is only growing.

AXELOS - a key UK based provider of best practice - has certified over 5 million people since its establishment in 2013.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) - a similar, but US based provider of best practice - had certified over 1.2 million people by 2017, increasing its revenues by an additional \$70 million for that year.

This is to say nothing of the thousands of training vendors across the globe generating notable profits providing training and certifications on behalf of the above and other best practice organisations.

SO HAS ALL THIS TRAINING REALLY MADE A DIFFERENCE?

YES... AND NO.

The project management training boom has been unbelievably successful at increasing the professionalisation of the industry and generating a collective awareness of the key elements of what constitutes 'good project management'¹. This professionalism and awareness is driving an increase in project-related jobs, with PMI themselves forecasting an increase in project-oriented roles of nearly 2.2 million each year in the 10 year span 2017-2027². What was once simply a part of a senior role is now entrenched as a profession in and of itself.

With the rapid growth in both the diversity of certifications and training offerings, organisations are sending large numbers of staff off to training to become better at 'projects'. It is in this situation that we find a key failure occurring wholesale across the project management training industry.

It is not the new training offerings that are the concern, it's who is attending the training and the organisational support network they return to.

Let's explore.

¹ Even though no one can agree on what that is

² We will ignore the self-fulfilling prophecy nature of the idea that PMI, by producing this well publicised forecast, are at least partially responsible for the very same increases in project-oriented industry growth.

When an experienced project practitioner attends a new training course, the ultimate result is 'another tool for their toolbox'. This is great.

It's the training for the inexperienced 'project-newbie' staff that falls noticeably short. What we end up with is a staff member with new theoretical knowledge but without the experience or skillset to adequately translate that into the imperfect reality of organisational project management. This results in either:

- a) the staff member making a valiant effort to incorporate a few elements into their approach, assuming something is better than nothing,

or, what we see more often is

- b) a complete abandonment of the new theory as '*excessively burdensome*', '*not useful*', or '*getting in the way of real work*'.

The cumulative result is that numerous organisations are plagued with (often self-diagnosed) 'low project management maturity'. Within these organisations we find two distinct classes of project managers:

1. external practitioners that are hired in on high daily rates, and
2. internal 'project managers', often referred to colloquially within organisations with the inverted commas exactly as described here, i.e. more in name than skill.

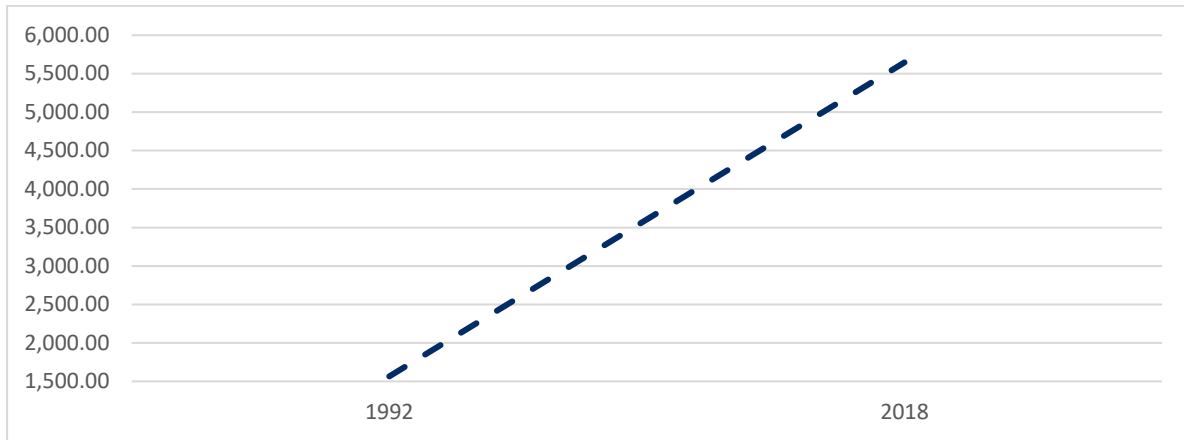
SO, WHAT WORKS? – HOW DO WE INCREASE ORGANISATIONAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT CAPABILITY?

Before we can address this question, we need to explore the nature of human growth and progress.

To do this, let's take a little detour and consider the Australian (or any) stock market. In its whole, the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) represents both the cumulative investment decisions of over 7 million people and the respective growth of the best performing Australian businesses. For this reason alone, the ASX is a unique representation of human growth - but there's a further bonus - the market can be plotted graphically enabling us to easily identify patterns in human growth behaviour.

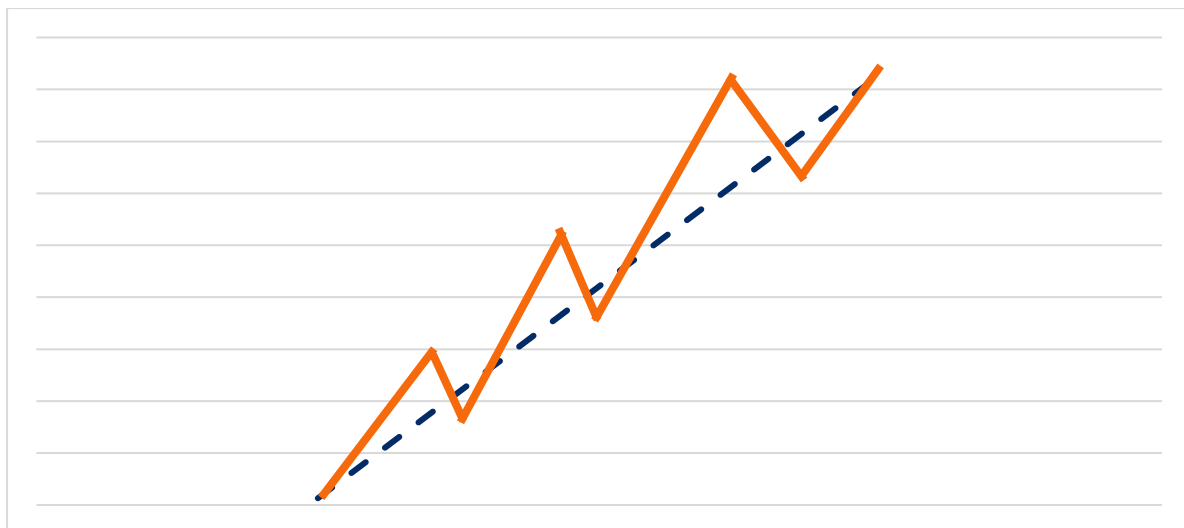
Let's consider the value of the index that tracks the largest 200 ASX listed stocks (the XJO), it closed out the year in 1992 at a value of \$1,564. It notably increased over the following 16 years and in December 2018 closed out \$5,646. If we were to plot that simply on a two-axis price/time graph it would look something like Figure 1 below. This clearly shows us the economic progress and growth we made as humans over that time period.

Figure 1. Simple plot of ASX200 value over time



But, that's not how it occurs in reality. Reality³ would look something closer to Figure 2.

Figure 2. A Somewhat more realistic plot of ASX200 value over time



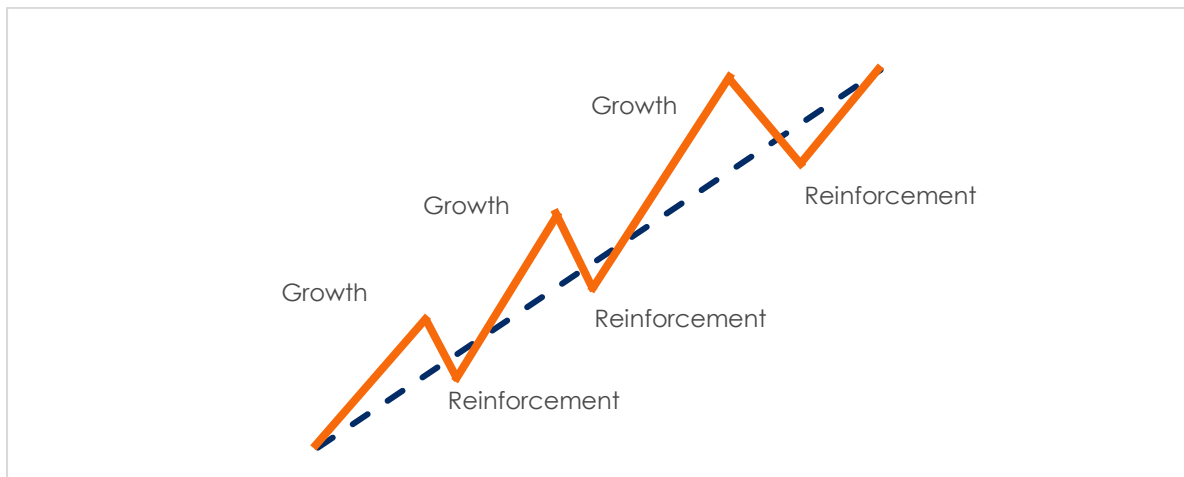
What we see are waves. We humans grow in waves.

This is where training fundamentally falls short. It is a 'once and done' solution, that simply doesn't achieve the capability growth it seeks to.

Analysing the growth wave pattern, we can derive insight into what might work. The waves seem to start with a 'growth phase' followed by a 'grounding and reinforcement phase'. To help visualise this, see the labels on Figure 3.

³ A simplified reality, as we need to stay conceptual here.

Figure 3. Labelled Growth Waves



If you've ever had the joy of witnessing a small child learn and grow, the nature of these growth waves will be familiar. The wave cycle is particularly easy to identify in the learning undertaken by our little ones of toddler age (2-3yrs). Anyone who has ever experienced sleep, reading or toilet training with a little one can attest to this very cycle. A few days forward, a couple days back, then a few days forward to a higher level, then a couple more back. Grow, then regress to cement and reinforce, then grow again.

SO, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT CAPABILITY GROWTH?

We have found that this same pattern holds true for growth in organisational and individual project management capability, which leaves us with two choices.

1. We can staff our organisational change projects entirely with external practitioners on high daily rates (effective but expensive with high attrition rates), or
2. We can build on and invest in our internal capability.

As we started off talking about training, let's assume we all agree on the value of option 2.

We are then confronted with the pertinent question: **What model will best ensure maximum capability growth given the wave based nature of human growth?**

The model needs to ensure provisions for both growth phases and reinforcement phases. It also needs to stimulate and enable increasingly larger growth waves to ensure plateaus are broken.

INTRODUCING GO TO PMO'S RAPID CAPABILITY GROWTH MODEL

The GO TO PMO Rapid Capability Growth model can be summarised as below:



This model doesn't just adapt to natural growth mechanisms, it actively stimulates the next phases, creating faster, more dramatic change.

- 1** First we create growth. The Growth Push is stimulated through personal coaching, transferring not just the lessons and experiences, but actively transferring the thinking and frame of mind needed to tailor and adapt theory to reality.
- 2** We then leverage Assurance mechanisms to trigger small regressions for capability reinforcement periods. By challenging the progress made in the previous growth push and identifying and exposing flaws in thinking and any faulty foundations, we push away any overconfidence and cement the true new skills and capabilities built.
- 3** Finally, the Accessibility mechanisms (passive mentoring programs, toolkit libraries and knowledge/learning hubs) allow for self-directed, environmentally responsive answers. The ability for self-direction coupled with consistency & scalability allows for peer groups to form across the organisation, creating collectively larger new growth waves.

MODEL IMPLEMENTATION

The GO TO PMO Rapid Capability Growth Model can be implemented by a sufficiently experienced group of internal practitioners as part of a concerted capability uplift program or a project office service offering.

However, in low maturity environments, we often find this level of experience lacking and those that do have these skills are often already fully engaged with existing backlogs of work. In those situations, leveraging external expertise is often the best course of action. We specifically use the word leverage, as by investing (what is often a comparatively small amount) in expertise will repeatedly drive dramatic organisational capability improvements across both ongoing and future projects.

Excitingly, those organisations that have the see the sense in investing in their project staff also experience bonus effects:

- Faster project results
- Elimination of wasted time spent on project governance
- Reduced project administrative load
- Faster and more accurate project decisions
- Improved organisational reputation
- Dramatically improved rates of project success
- Capability improvements that carry across to the broader organisation
- Notable improvements to the R.O.I. of Project Management Offices
- Reduced project start-up time

So next time project management training is suggested for a new or underdeveloped cohort of project staff, have courage – challenge the thinking, leverage growth waves, and create real and lasting improvement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Brendon Baker is a market leader in all facets of business transformation, project management and PMO. As Managing Director of GO TO PMO, his sole purpose is to provide an unprecedented level of confidence for organisations taking on change. He knows that confidence and clarity of the journey is of supreme importance to successful project results. He supports those in need, those in over their heads and those looking to be better than they already are. To discuss how he can help you further, visit www.gotopmo.com.au.