



A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a dirt road stretches from the bottom center towards the middle ground. Long, dark shadows of people and a vehicle are cast across the road from the left. The middle ground shows sparse desert vegetation and a body of water. In the background, there are low mountains under a clear, light blue sky.

Rite of PASSAGE

BY DENENE BROX

PROPER COACHING MEANS THOSE
NEW TO THE PROFESSION DON'T
HAVE TO UNDERGO A TRIAL BY FIRE.

When young project managers join your team, they are often eager to learn and tackle new challenges. As an experienced project leader, you should be just as eager to develop new talent and coach them for success.

To effectively groom those just starting out, experienced project managers must strike a balance between teaching the basics of project management and preparing them for what to expect—while simultaneously encouraging newcomers to think for themselves.

“The ideal environment to groom a new project manager is in both a coaching and an on-the-job-training environment,” says Dallas, Texas, USA-based Conrado Morlan, PMP, PgMP, Americas IT program delivery director at the international shipping company DHL.

While seasoned veterans should take the initiative to get their team up to speed, the members themselves

must be willing to learn.

“This environment is a two-way avenue, where the experienced project manager is not solely responsible for the process. The new project manager must also be fully engaged,” Mr. Morlan says.

No matter what your intentions are when it comes to creating the ideal coaching environment and sharing your hard-won knowledge with younger project managers, you must first understand what works and what doesn't.

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

Time is a key ingredient when coaching young project managers, yet during a complicated project with looming deadlines and changing scope, it may be the hardest component to master.

If you're a senior project professional, it's easy to think you're too busy to spend time attending to others' needs.

FIRST FREAKOUTS

Milestones get missed, budgets are underestimated and scope creeps. Here are five ways to calm a panicked team the first time it experiences a project gone awry:

- 1) DON'T PANIC.** When such situations arise, the project manager, as team leader, must remain in control, says Muhammed Arif, PMP, Lucky Textile Mills, Karachi, Pakistan. “Try not to show panic or anxiety,” he says. “Getting too hyper or having a temper as a way to get problems resolved might have a short-term benefit, but ultimately it will produce negativity and unhealthy relationships going forward.”
- 2) TAKE THE TIME TO REALLY UNDERSTAND THE ISSUE.** “First determine the size and nature of the beast you must fight,” says Jaycee Krüger, PMP, Greybeards Inc., Gauteng, South Africa. “Get a good, factual perspective of how far the project is off track—even simply expressing the variance in terms of percentage of the original plan.”
- 3) KEEP TEAM MEMBERS INFORMED.** In the midst of what is perceived as a project crisis, the project manager should share his or her strategy for getting the project back on track, advises Sherolyn L. Sellers, PMP, MasterWorks Consulting Group, Tucker, Georgia, USA. This should be done, if possible, in a face-to-face meeting with the entire team so that everyone is updated with the same information at the same time.
- 4) ASK THEM FOR FEEDBACK.** Allowing new project managers an opportunity to offer input on solutions is an empowering move—just don't get too hung up on the vocabulary. “They may not use exact project management terminology but that's okay—it's the grooming period,” Mr. Arif says.
- 5) KEEP THE FAITH.** There are no “perfect” projects, says Conrado Morlan, PMP, PgMP, DHL, Dallas, Texas, USA. But by keeping the lines of communication open, each setback can be an invaluable learning experience for young team members.

“One common error is not spending sufficient time with the groomee,” says Jaycee Krüger, PMP, managing director of Greybeards Inc., a project management coaching and mentoring firm for the construction industry in Gauteng, South Africa. “It takes deep and long discussions and mutual respect before proper coaching can be effective.”

Allowing yourself to become so swamped in other activities that you neglect grooming new project managers leads to lost momentum—and you risk losing all you’ve gained, Mr. Morlan warns. “It’s important to schedule time for consistent meetings with your team members to ensure that they receive a steady stream of tasks and feedback,” he says.

SEE WHAT YOU’RE STARTING WITH

The first step when working with any new project manager is to take an inventory of his or her skills and knowledge base. That effort pays off because you can play to their strengths for greater project efficiency.

Don’t make assumptions about newer project managers’ knowledge base, says Muhammed Arif, PMP, enterprise resource planning project manager at Lucky Textile Mills in Karachi, Pakistan.

“What would happen if you were trying to learn a new language, and during the early stages the instructor starts using difficult vocabulary and words that are going over your head?” he asks.

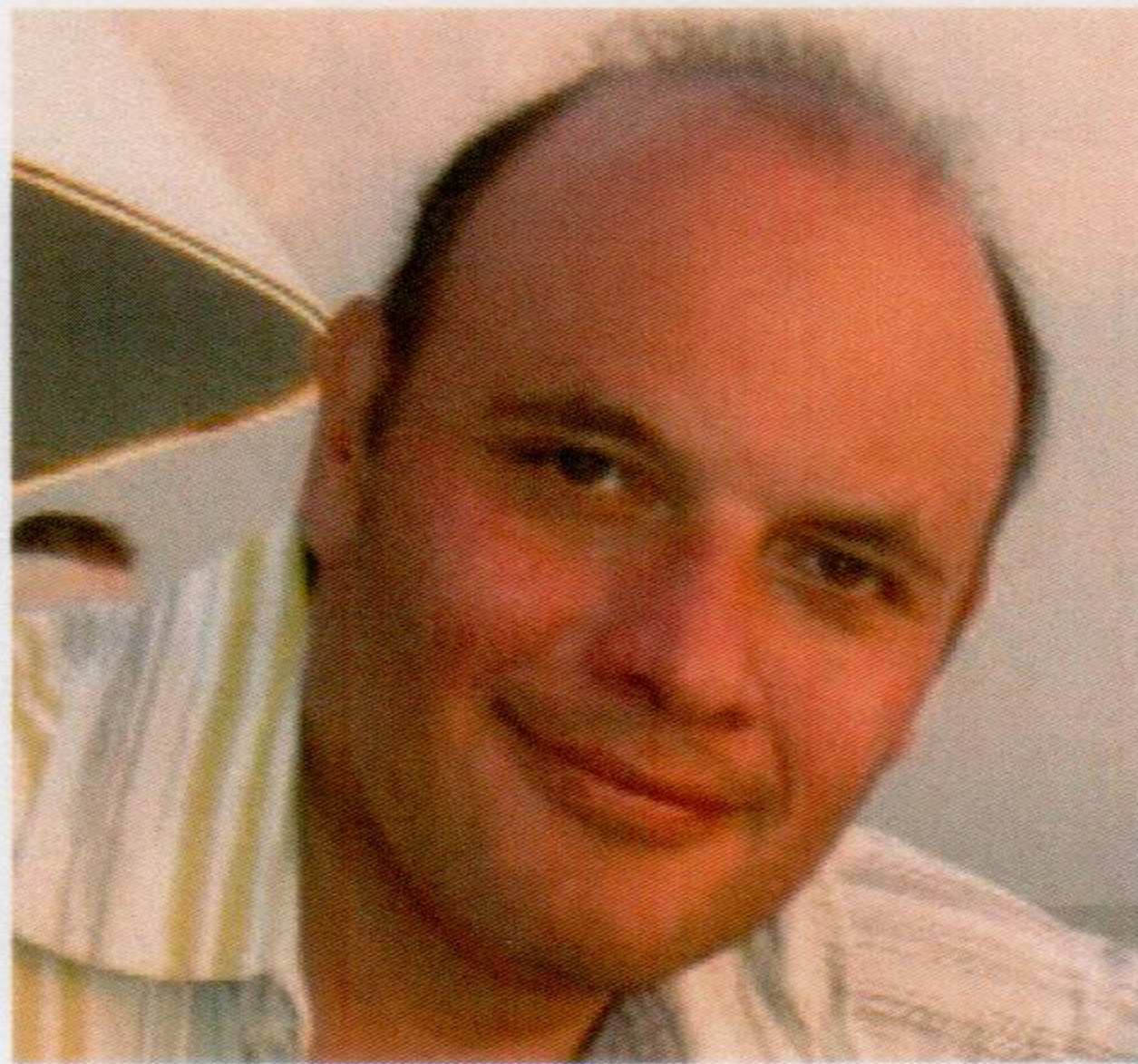
That’s why you must be sure everyone on your team understands project management lingo and the basic processes. After all, “you need to make sure the ‘newbie’ actually knows what you’re talking about,” says Mr. Arif, who also owns Teknofunctional, an IT project management consultancy.

Failing to identify the knowledge and skill level from newer project managers is a big mistake, according to Daniela Morais Henriques, PMI-RMP, PMP, a transition manager for the IT

and consulting giant IBM in Sao Paulo, Brazil. “Only by doing that can you perform a quick gap analysis to then create action and training plans for ‘newbies’ to ensure growth on their career path,” she says.

Expecting too much without proper coaching is a major risk.

“I have witnessed many newcomers with the potential to become great project managers abandon the profession due to frustration,” says Sherolyn L. Sellers, PMP, president of MasterWorks Consulting Group, a program and project management consultancy in Tucker, Georgia, USA. “It is not acceptable to simply point a new project manager to



> TIP

When coaching team members, set both short- and long-term goals, says Conrado Morlan, PMP, PgMP, DHL, Dallas, Texas, USA. “This will enable a young project manager to have a clear understanding of the expectations set on him or her. The new project manager can work toward the goal and look for advice on the areas that need refinement and improvement.”

company resources containing detailed project management procedures and assume they will figure it out.”

Of course, the coaching process itself takes time.

“Discovering their skills, strengths and weaknesses is a process that doesn’t happen overnight,” Ms. Sellers says.

PUT ME IN, COACH!

Because of pressing demands, it can be tempting to delegate multiple work streams right away or to assume that a newer project manager has a generalist background, says Max Dufour, PMP, New York, New York, USA-based principal and program manager at SunGard, a business and IT consultancy for financial services and energy companies.

You also have to determine a newcomer’s work style and comfort level.

“Through dialogue and consensus, it’s possible to find the optimum role for each new project manager and determine how each team member can contribute at his or her full potential,” he adds.

When it comes to delegating tasks, assign small ones at first so that you don’t overwhelm a new project manager.

“On all projects, there are always small portions which can be del-

egated,” Mr. Dufour says. “Rather than creating ‘project assistant’ roles, where some work is passed on without any true ownership, it works much better to delegate an entire work stream and to assign responsibility for it to one person.”

For instance, he might put a new team member in charge of all aspects of training—rather than just scheduling training sessions.

Be sure to give team members complete authority over these assignments. This empowers them to come up with their own ideas and solutions to problems. Letting young project managers think creatively will build their confidence and the experience needed to earn promotions.

“Encourage them to continue on their project management journey because ‘practice makes permanent,’” Ms. Sellers says. “Before they know it, they will be a seasoned project manager, too.”

In the end, it’s not just project teams who win. Watching your young team members mature into confident project leaders who are able to weather the highs and lows of managing projects can be one of the most rewarding parts of your career. *PM*



> TIP

Go slow, suggests Sherolyn L.

Sellers, PMP, MasterWorks Consulting Group, Tucker, Georgia, USA. When mentoring a new project manager, be sure he or she truly understands the methodology—why you do what you do and how you do it.

“A seasoned project manager is usually thinking a few steps ahead on the project, so it’s common to think the newer project manager will also think as you do, but they may not,” she says.