

# Designing and Delivering High Performance Outcomes on Major Infrastructure Projects

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## Abstract

This presentation provides insight into how to set up major infrastructure projects for ongoing high performance. United leadership, establishing key result areas, embedding the right culture, diagnostic tools and system and process design are all critical to achieving successful outcomes. Learn how you can define, plan and deliver your projects through proven strategies and practical examples, including a case study from a major ongoing New Zealand infrastructure project.

This topic covers the importance of high performance on major infrastructure projects and specific strategies to achieve it, including:

- > Developing and measuring key result areas (KRAs) to ensure focus and accountability
- > Implementing an effective High Performance Plan and monitoring methods
- > Implementing systems and processes that are geared for collaboration and efficiency
- > Diagnostics, and how this constructive feedback can be used to coach leaders and teams

## Key Words

Major Projects, Infrastructure, High Performance, Leadership, Culture, High Performance Plan, KRAs, Measurement, Systems and Processes, Diagnostics

## Introduction

Major infrastructure projects are complex beasts, comprising a range of technical and people aspects. Successfully managing the people aspects - the relationships, leadership and culture - is a pre-requisite for efficient delivery of the technical aspects. If the people aspects are managed well, it allows the teams to get on with the job of bidding, planning or delivering the project. In this way, managing the people aspects is about avoiding common pitfalls - the broken relationships, miscommunications and disengaged staff - that prevent teams from working effectively. Creating a culture of high performance, however, goes beyond this and allows teams to realise their full potential. Research and our own experience tells us that creating a culture where team members collaborate, receive regular feedback and coaching, and are empowered to make decisions leads to high performance on major projects (Gregory et al., 2009). The objective of a high performance plan should therefore include both goals - removing the barriers to good work, and setting the project up and instilling the culture to promote great work. Projects also need to be set up for success in terms of how they are structured (Lawrence & Scanlan, 2007). Systems and processes need to be designed to drive collaboration and efficiency. Key result areas (KRAs) with specific, measurable key performance

# Designing and Delivering High Performance Outcomes on Major Infrastructure Projects

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indicators (KPIs) need to be established to drive focus and accountability. This paper demonstrates the above points in detail, providing an overview of how to set projects up for high performance from the outset, as well as how to maintain focus and momentum throughout the journey.

## United Leadership

One of the foundations for success on major infrastructure projects is establishing a united leadership team. This means a team aligned not only on what they want to achieve, but aligned around their approach and how they want to work together. Leadership teams need to be committed to working collaboratively in an open, honest and respectful manner. The focus shouldn't be on having "nice" relationships within the group just for the sake of it. Rather, it is about creating the environment where issues (including internal issues within the leadership group) can be aired and discussed, and where best for project decisions are made (Boedker et al., 2011). Leadership groups also need to be aligned around the culture they want to embed across the project. This has far-ranging implications for how the project is set up, from the establishment of key result areas, to system and process design, to leadership development and training initiatives. Key questions are: do we want team members to be proactive or dependent in approaching tasks? Will we adopt a partnering approach with our clients and stakeholders? Do we aspire to a truly collaborative culture? Do we want leaders to empower staff or control them? Do we want a feedback culture, where individuals receive timely advice on how they can improve? Typically, leadership groups often don't clearly articulate their aspirational culture for the project and establish clear strategies for its promotion (Boedker et al.). A constructive, high performance culture is difficult to achieve, and requires significant planning and continual effort to establish and sustain (Gregory et al., 2009).

## Planning for High Performance

The importance of thorough planning at the outset and across the project lifespan cannot be emphasised enough. A clear project charter is a fundamental requirement to set the project up for success. A project charter describes the "what" (the scope of the project and how success will be defined), the "why" (benefits of delivering the project and the value of the project to the broader community) and the "how" (how the project team will approach the delivery of the project to ensure successful outcomes). In line with the principles of united leadership, the charter must have "buy in" from the leadership group (Gregory et al., 2009). If individuals at the top are not committed to the charter's basic principles, this will inevitably have ramifications down the track.

# Designing and Delivering High Performance Outcomes on Major Infrastructure Projects

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A comprehensive high performance plan is also required, with the objective of this plan to embed a constructive high performance culture facilitating the realisation of the broader objectives. As described above, the specific nature of this culture needs to be mapped out and agreed upon at the top. Ideally, a high performance plan includes an overview of the practical steps required to instil the necessary skills and habits in the broader team for outstanding project outcomes. A high performance plan should also include strategies to create an environment where everyone works towards personal excellence, delivering outstanding results and achieving personal satisfaction throughout the process. Understanding that approximately 80% of culture is determined by leader behaviour (Boedker et al., 2011), the high performance plan should place a strong emphasis on leaders embodying constructive behaviours and setting the right example for their teams.

Constructive high performance cultures are characterised by the following qualities:

- > Strong and consistent leadership at all levels
- > High levels of collaboration
- > Open communication lines
- > High productivity and efficiency
- > Role clarity
- > High levels of innovation
- > Increased employee engagement and commitment to the project
- > A strong focus on project objectives and key result areas
- > Fairness

## Focus and Accountability

Major projects are too large and complex for progress towards objectives to be tracked in an ad hoc fashion or using only one or two loosely defined criteria. In this way, a key part of the project charter is deciding on the KRAs for the project. KRAs play a key role in aligning the broader team around the core objectives and helping to focus time and energy around what is most important. Underpinning the KRAs are key performance indicators (KPIs), the specific and measurable objectives relating to each of the KRAs that allow progress towards the KRAs to be continually tracked. The KPIs should be designed so that their collective realisation ensures the achievement of the broader KRA, in the same way that the collective realisation of the KRAs should ensure the achievement of project and client outcomes (Lawrence & Scanlan, 2007).

# Designing and Delivering High Performance Outcomes on Major Infrastructure Projects

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One of the most common reasons for difficulties and poor outcomes on major infrastructure projects is a lack of role clarity (Bray & Brawley, 2002). All too often, individuals at the broader team, management and senior management levels have insufficient knowledge around their own roles, the roles of others and how their role relates to the bigger picture. Well-designed KRAs and KPIs assist in the planning of project roles and responsibilities. Critically, the relationship between individual roles and the KRAs and KPIs need to be clearly communicated and continually emphasised to promote ongoing role clarity and a focus on what is most important (Bray & Brawley). Identifying KRAs and KPIs also assists leaders to recognise where collaboration with other teams and functions is needed to achieve the bigger picture goals.

Throughout the project, progress made on KPIs, their related KRAs and specified project milestones should be closely monitored, with sub-par performance addressed (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002). This promotes accountability on team members throughout the project as they clearly understand what is expected of them. Importantly, information provided by the KPIs and KRAs should be used to focus resources for the future, rather than to reflect on the past (Bray & Brawley, 2002). Issues need to be identified promptly through keeping the feedback cycle short. This means providing updates on KPI and KRA measures regularly so that poor performance can be managed proactively (Corporate Leadership Council).

## System and Process Design

Project teams delivering major infrastructure projects often aspire to a constructive culture of high performance, only to have their systems and processes hinder rather than support this objective. The importance of having your systems and processes actively promote desired behaviours is often underestimated, or overlooked altogether (Boedker et al., 2011). Many project teams aspire to a culture of collaboration and efficiency, and allocate significant resources to training team members to promote this goal. Often however, there exists "red tape" restricting the capacity of staff to demonstrate initiative and get things done, and a lack of processes in place to promote, or even allow, members of different functions to collaborate (Lawrence & Scanlan, 2007). If well-designed and implemented, systems and processes can powerfully promote collaboration and efficiency. How tasks are structured, how information is stored, and how approval processes are designed all have a big impact on promoting these objectives (Lawrence & Scanlan). Designing systems and processes in line with the project's strategic goals and desired behaviours makes a big difference to the culture on a project and the outcomes achieved.

# Designing and Delivering High Performance Outcomes on Major Infrastructure Projects

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## Diagnostic & Assessment Tools

Diagnostic tools can be used effectively to provide timely snapshot assessments of the culture and behaviours of project boards, management teams and the broader project team. This is critical as the underlying culture and behaviours of groups tends to have a major impact on KRA and KPI performance (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002). Regular diagnostic surveys allow for a proactive rather than reactive approach to embedding a high performance culture, identifying the areas requiring attention so that resources can be targeted when and where they are needed most. This can include coaching individual leaders to develop strategies to promote the specific constructive behaviours required. Other types of assessment tools are also useful for providing the feedback necessary for individuals and teams to make positive changes (Corporate Leadership Council). For example, leadership development tools can be used as part of a coaching program to assist project leaders to think and behave more constructively and to drive these behaviours in those they are leading.

## Case Study

### Background

BRS has been assisting a project team comprised of a number of different organisations in the delivery of a major infrastructure project in New Zealand. This project team identified a high performance culture as being its key enabler for delivering an outstanding project. Following this, a comprehensive high performance plan was drafted up by BRS to instil the high performance culture that would drive progress towards the client and project objectives. This plan was then reviewed and endorsed by the board and the management team.

### Implementation

In line with the high performance plan developed, the first priority was embedding a united leadership approach. This was recognised as being extremely important by both the management team and the board. Specific workshops were held between the board and management team and also within the management team. In these sessions alliance principles were established to act as an overarching guide for how the project would be governed at the top in terms of values and behaviours. These principles consisted of openness, transparency, respectfulness and a commitment to best for project decision making, as well as partnering with the client and key stakeholders to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. In the initial workshops the distinct roles of the board and the management team were established, as well as behavioural expectations and communication protocols between the two groups. Ongoing summits between the board and the management team have been held to reiterate the key principles of united leadership and address any pressing issues to ensure the groups remain united.

# Designing and Delivering High Performance Outcomes on Major Infrastructure Projects

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The high performance plan outlined a pathway to achieving a culture characterised by the following qualities: collaboration, a focus on outcomes, role clarity, a one team focus, engaged employees, fairness and innovation. The plan emphasised the role of leaders in setting the example for their staff and actively reinforcing constructive behaviours. To assist the management team to further their constructive mindset and influence, each member completed a 360 degree assessment and has an ongoing personal coaching plan. Across the project's different functions, alignment workshops have been held to ensure each function is internally united in their approach and clear on roles and expectations.

To create the necessary focus and accountability across the project, KRAs were developed. Specific KPIs were identified for each KRA to track progress towards their realisation. Clear milestones for what should be achieved by when were also set. These initiatives helped to increase the accountability of teams and heightened the focus on outcomes, a key part of the intended high performance culture. Additionally, regular diagnostic health check surveys have been completed by the board, management team and broader project team to track progress towards the intended culture and identify areas requiring immediate attention.

## Outcomes

The project is ongoing, and the continued implementation of the high performance plan has made measurable improvements to the operating culture across the project. These improvements have been seen in critical areas such as collaboration, focus, role clarity and accountability. This has led to initial success in the delivery of the project and positions the team strongly for future stages. As a case study, it demonstrates that achieving high performance on major infrastructure projects requires much more than a focus on the initial set up - a range of ongoing and targeted initiatives are needed to maintain momentum and drive further improvement.



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# Designing and Delivering High Performance Outcomes on Major Infrastructure Projects

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## Conclusion

The numerous technical and people-related aspects of major infrastructure projects present a number of challenges to success. As a result, the bid, design and delivery stages all require a highly co-ordinated and focused effort across the teams, functions and organisations involved. This takes a strategic approach and comprehensive planning. Typically, it is a break down in relationships, and the management of staff - not an inability to deliver on the technical aspects - that leads to poor project outcomes (Lawrence & Scanlan, 2007). Investing the time and energy to achieve a truly united leadership team and promote a constructive, high performance culture is critical to success (Boedker et al., 2011). Ensuring focus and accountability through KRAs, designing systems and processes to promote and not hinder desired behaviours, and having appropriate measures to track progress are all key elements. As has been demonstrated, these strategies need to be implemented from the outset and actively managed throughout the lifespan of the project to ensure project and client objectives are realised.

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