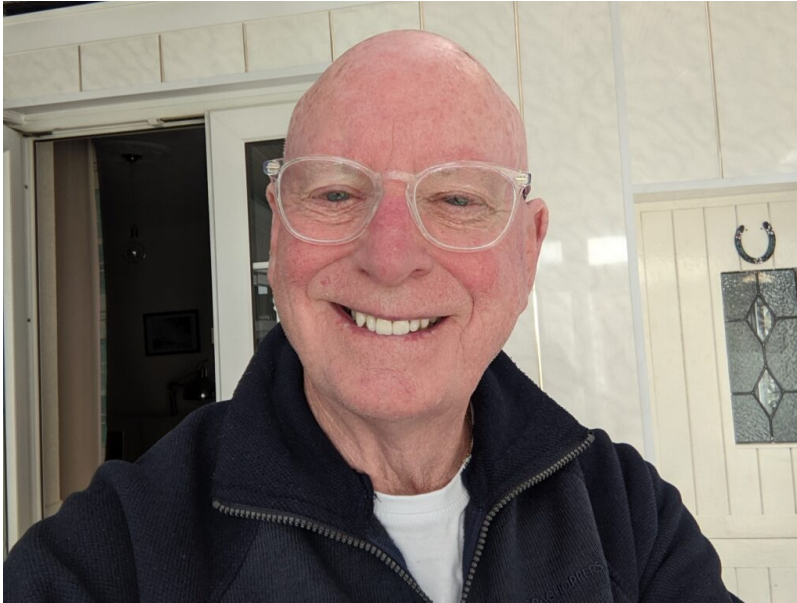


# Achieving Grand Mastery of Project Execution: How Project Directors Navigate the uncharted Arena of Major Projects Delivery

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**A chance encounter, led to a highly informative discussion with a project leader whose career trajectory reads like a roll call of the world's most ambitious major-project and programme undertakings.**

Retired Project Director Barry Ryan offered a rare glimpse into the demanding and often unseen world of the Major Projects Director. And while his name is perhaps unfamiliar to many, it is whispered with reverence in the upper echelons of project management, both in the UK where he is currently based, and throughout the international project delivery scene.

Following our recent series on project execution, a comment on our LinkedIn page ignited a conversation that swiftly revealed I was not speaking with an ordinary project manager. I was in dialogue with a titan, an internationally renowned Major Projects Director, and rarer still, one who has navigated the complex terrain of giga-projects. Those types of colossal project endeavours commanding budgets in the billions of dollars.

It is a perspective seldom illuminated, largely because the cohort who operate at this level of the industry is so exclusive – the 1 percent of the 1 percent of project professionals.

Intrigued by the genesis of such a distinguished career, I began by asking Barry about his early steps into the profession.

"I studied engineering London gaining first an undergraduate degree and then achieving Chartered status, initially setting out to be a project engineer. It was, to be the perfect foundation for a route into a career as a Project Director. This together with gaining experience at the ground level of project management gave me the understanding of project management delivery and execution from the inside out of a project. As well as the network needed to realise my potential" His voice, carrying the subtle cadence of his Liverpool roots, held a quiet authority honed over five decades. "My career has spanned over 55 years and I have worked on projects from oil and gas, to ship building, to Railways to mining, pharmaceuticals and Banking. It is a career that has taken me all over the world and placed me in rooms with some of the most influential and important people in the world. To say entire companies have pivoted on my recommendations, is not a statement that I make lightly."

The ascent to becoming a Major Project Director, Barry explained, is not a deliberate climb up a clearly marked career ladder. "Becoming a Major Project Director is not something that one sets out to achieve, it is a combination of many things; experience, ability, competence, opportunity. It is the culmination of networks, placing you in the right rooms at the right time. It is a mixture of innate personality, and of the willingness to explore further and harder than others around me, to take risks and to act upon insight, when others would be paralysed by the enormity of all. To be both fearless and in service to my team and those that deliver on the front line. And to be willing to bear the ultimate accountability for when things go wrong, and more importantly take the tough decisions before they do."

When I pressed for some of the most memorable projects from his illustrious career, the ensuing list was breathtaking in its scope and significance.

"Early in my career the first roles in project delivery were in the oil and gas sector. I had taken a risk, and moved my career from the UK to South Africa to work on the development of major oil refinery's. I was following what was to become a core skill of recognising where there was demand for my skillset. There I was given more responsibility within the team, mainly due to my engineering expertise, coupled with the ability to execute on the projects I was placed on. Success there led me to move on to an opportunity in Scandinavia, working on the development of at the time the largest semi-submersible floating production and platform. Designing a ultra-deep water drilling rig, that could withstand the demands of rough ocean currents. As my career progressed opportunities were coming from larger and larger development projects. I was gaining recognition as an expert in the fields that I was working in, and being called to deliver on more complex and prestigious client projects"

Recognising the need for a broader skillset to navigate increasingly complex projects, Barry pursued further academic development. "I took the opportunity to complete a master's level degree, which allowed me to broaden my capabilities adding essential skills around contract management, corporate law, Financial analysis, people management and operations. It added to my confidence in being able to deliver at an executive level bigger and bigger projects, where I knew my peers did not have the same combination of broad technical experience and critical thinking and delivery attributes. I continued to be called upon to work on international projects. I worked in Australia for Rio Tinto, the largest global producers of iron ore. Supporting the increase of ore exports to China from 250 tonnes to 350 million tonnes per year. Solving not just a mining solution, but resolving the complex logistic requirements for the rail vehicle systems and track signalling requirements that had become a major bottle-neck to moving the materials ahead of export. I worked on both sides of client delivery, as well as reporting in to the executive

team, owners and government, with regards to operational, commercial and regulatory requirements.”

Throughout his extensive career, Barry cultivated a formidable reputation. “In the years throughout my career I had secured a fierce reputation for not just delivery, but for tough negotiation, and adherence to quality and standards. I have a no-nonsense and uncompromising approach to delivering.” This uncompromising stance has seen him lead some of the world’s most significant infrastructure projects. “More recently, it is my consultancy and advisory skills that have been in most demand. I was uniquely involved in the delivery of Europe’s largest rail infrastructure major project, as I was asked to sit on the independent Advisory panel to the Board of HS2, the UK’s High Speed Rail initiative. Reporting directly to the then UK Chancellor Phil Hammond and Secretary of state for Transport, Chris Grayling, the group stood as an independent challenge to the multi-billion-pound programme, key to the UK’s prosperity and standing on the world stage.”

The sheer breadth of Barry’s career is staggering. “I’ve operated on every continent. From major airports, I worked on the Stansted airport extension. I was an advisor to Goldman Sachs, ahead of a \$200M financing deal on the world’s largest harsh winter drilling platform, the Erik Raudd for Ocean Rig of Norway. I engaged with giants like Bechtel, Barclays Bank, ICI, Docklands Light Railway, Railtrack, BNFL, Elf Petroleum, Shell, and the UK Ministry of Defence.”

Given Barry’s ascent to the position of Project Director on mega and giga-projects, the pivotal question remains: what critical steps facilitated such a unique career trajectory?

“Several key areas have been fundamental to my career,” Barry explained, his voice gaining emphasis as he outlined the core tenets of his success. “Firstly, political awareness and engagement are crucial. Mega-projects operate within a highly politicised environment, making the ability to ‘read a room’ and understand the underlying agendas of all stakeholders absolutely essential. Secondly, risk recognition and management are paramount. You must thoroughly understand the potential threats to the project – their origins and, most importantly, the reasons behind them. Thirdly, a strong grasp of contract and subcontract law is non-negotiable. This knowledge dictates the permissible actions when challenges arise, particularly concerning third-party involvement. Furthermore, at this level, a significant amount of time is dedicated to financial management. This is critical, especially given the inevitable changes that large-scale projects encounter. Next, as Project Director, I consider myself the ‘owner’ of time. No milestone can be altered without my explicit approval. This necessitates meticulous planning, a process in which I collaborate closely with my planning team, maintaining daily communication to stay abreast of progress, or indeed, any lack thereof. Finally, people are at the heart of it all. I ensure I am accessible to everyone, from the most junior team member to senior leadership. A common misconception is that projects only falter from the top down; in reality, issues frequently originate at the ground level or implode from the centre. Therefore, as Project Director, my responsibility is to be acutely aware of any threat to the programme’s delivery. I firmly believe in ‘management by walking about’ – it’s indispensable. My management approach is inherently collaborative; I am a strong believer in the power of teams!”

Listening to Barry articulate these critical leadership tenets felt like attending a masterclass in professional project delivery. He peeled back the layers of a role often shrouded in complexity, rendering it both more relatable though undeniably no less demanding.

The pathway to such heights, remains a formidable one. It necessitates a singular confluence of experience, opportunity, a propensity for calculated risk, and a spectrum of attributes both cultivated and inherent. “There is a requirement for a level of curiosity, and unwillingness to accept anything below great. Whilst at the same time accepting that perfection is rarely achieved, and that failure is always lurking. You are ultimately accountable, and when things do go wrong the buck stops with you. Your reputation literally precedes you and you are only ever as good as your last project. It is a lonely role, where often you are moving across a global chessboard. Your assignments pick you, and you need to be primed and ready to go wherever demand calls.” Yet, reflecting on Barry’s fifty-five-year odyssey, a clear thread of strategic application emerges, rather than the impact of a series of lucky career breaks. The seemingly disparate dots connecting to form a remarkable picture.

When asked if this was the career he had always envisioned and what tools aided his ascent to the top, his response was both layered and complex. “When I walk into a room of peers, as a Project Director I must communicate gravitas. Not necessarily through just speaking, but in the way that I carry myself and in the way that I question, analyse and respond. When I take on a project, which is often at a point when things are going wrong, I have a ‘roller-deck’ in my head, a go-to map of project experiences that I have seen in the past, and solutions that I can pull on from my experience. I am reading people, the situation and the dynamics of a project. However I am never starting from scratch”. It is another ‘aha’ moment for me.

As our insightful conversation drew to a close, I sought a final piece of wisdom, a framework for understanding the pulse of any project. Is there a single report that practitioners can refer to, or a key metric which provides the perfect framing and context for a project’s position?

With a knowing smile, and without hesitation Barry quotes the opening lines of Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “The Elephant’s Child”:

***“I KEEP six honest serving-men***

***(They taught me all I knew);***

***Their names are What and Why and When***

***And How and Where and Who.”***

It was a powerful insight and the perfect conclusion to an enthralling discussion.

Inspired and armed with a fresh perspective, the world of mega and giga-projects suddenly felt just that slight bit more within my reach. Perhaps, the next giga-project opportunity is just around the corner.

And who knew, a touch of Kipling might just be the guiding light of inspiration to achieve it.

**Barry Ryan is an experienced Interim, Senior Director, specialising in the delivery of Major Projects and Programmes, focused on Operations, Risk mitigations and Improving business & financial performance. You can reach Barry through [LinkedIn](#) here.**

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