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Design Thinking Framework to develop students' creative ethical leadership approach: A case study in international fashion marketing and management

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Abstract

This project aimed to examine how applying a Skills Development Framework to Design Thinking makes it possible to enable students to develop ethical leadership skills. As a human-centric and non-linear process, Design Thinking can support the education system in focusing not simply in finding an innovative sustainable solution but in building an ethical attitude within the decision-making process.

The case study involved English Level 5, BA International Fashion Marketing and Management students at Coventry University London, for three years over 2020, 2021, and 2022, which in total included 130 students from Europe, Asia and Africa. As part of the module plan and assessment, they organised an online event around a specific Sustainable Development Goal. The learning outcomes focused on helping the students balance the growth of people and actions through the Design Thinking steps when creating, planning and delivering the event. In this way, while considering how an ethical leader should act, they became familiar with an academic ethical project development process that is also replicable in the working environment.

A collection of theories, and both qualitative and quantitative primary research data, had been collected to support the cohorts. This helped the students to structure, plan and implement a successful event, alongside the development of their academic and employability skills. The results confirmed that ethical leadership can be a tool accessible to everyone if structured as a step-by-step process. The clear and positive feedback from the students also confirmed the successful outcomes.

Keywords: Design Thinking, ethical leaders, ethical education, Sustainable Development Goals, ethical fashion

Introduction

The United Nations (UN, 1987) outlined sustainability as the ability to meet the demand of present and future generations, both defined as a priority. Considering the imminent Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) deadline in 2030 (UN, 2022), creativity and innovation are becoming key elements to address and balance the three main dimensions: profit, people and planet (Elkington, 1998; Bansal 2002; Hofenk et al. 2019), of ethical growth. To achieve this, the redesign of management style and internal culture has been targeted as a starting point (Ogbonna & Harris 2000; Nguyen & Mohamed 2011; Burns et al., 2015; Ducan

2018) and as surmised by Dzhunushalieva and Teuber (2024) in their analysis of the literature, this should embrace collaborative innovations, eco-friendly innovations, co-innovation and responsible innovation.

Embracing this vision as a leader is particularly challenging when it comes to the fashion industry. The violation of fashion workers' human rights was shown prominently following the Rana Plaza Collapse, in 2013 (ILO, 2013) and marked the beginning of the Fashion Revolution Movement (2018). Moreover, only in 2018, under the auspices of the UN, fashion stakeholders started to understand the industry's negative impact on climate and committed to change (UN, 2018). However, looking at the current report for the Fashion Revolution Transparency Index (2023) and SDG 2022 report (UN, 2023), the industry needs to review its approach to business and foster mindful ethical oriented leaders.

In this context, undergraduate (UG), Year 2 students were challenged to develop an innovative live event to build awareness around SDG, while applying an ethical leadership approach. The aim would be to build leadership which is collaborative and embraces creativity while changing the conflicts and tension that come from differences into strengths (Cooper & Nirenberg, 2012; Burns et al., 2015).

This project aimed to support fashion students to develop practical ethical leadership skills. This is essential towards succeeding in the current market landscape and achieving the SDG. Relevant theory and the collection of primary research data have been used for each step of the process to make sure that the results are replicable within the education system and in real work scenarios.

This case study explores future creative leaders' needs by introducing and applying the critical project management frameworks using the design thinking methodology. The aim is to direct Year 2 students in building an innovative fashion event with an ethical approach around three different sustainable development goals:

- 4th SDG, Quality Education – cohort 2020
- 10th SDG, Reduce Inequalities – cohort 2021
- 13th SDG, Climate Action – cohort 2022

There is no evidence of instructions in the literature about how design thinking can become a planning tool to train creative leaders . Furthermore, it has never been applied to the fashion industry as an ethical managerial method to achieve an SDG. Students experienced how to lead and understand that balancing priorities around people and activities is essential to realise the 3Ps (people, profit, planet) equally. The process can be extended to any team project around a sustainable development goal in any other industry, since it is able to enhance students' discovery, awareness and practice on how to achieve goals with an ethical leadership approach.

Theoretical background on design thinking to develop creative skills with an ethical leadership approach in higher education

Sustainability is not simply a goal, but a new way of thinking which constitutes living, planning, working and building relationships. In 2015, 193 UN states agreed on seeking the 17 SDGs by 2030 (UN, 2022). Critical towards achieving this goal is the ability of leaders to integrate SDGs into the core of the business strategy (IISD, 2018). As such they must embrace a style that creates a sense of shared responsibility toward attaining the goals.

When looking at the current reports and analysis about the fashion industry and its results versus the SDGs, there is clear evidence of misalignment and lack of ethical leadership practices (Fashion Revolution, 2022). "The industry is responsible for 2–8% of the world's greenhouse gas emission, 20% of the world's wastewater, 100 billion dollars lost due to under utilisation and lack of recycling, and 9% of annual microplastic losses to the ocean" (UN, 2022b). Moreover, there is plenty of evidence of workers in the sector operating in inadequate conditions and suffering abuses (Oxfam, 2019; Roberts-Islam, 2020; The Economist, 2021). The sector is deemed to fall short when considering progress on diversity and inclusion (Institute of Digital Fashion 2021). On the other hand, fashion is a "$2.4 trillion-dollar industry that employs 300 million people across the value chain" (UN, 2021) and it is predicted to keep growing due to the clothing forecast with demand estimated to increase by 63% by 2030 (UK Parliament, 2019; Niinimäki et al., 2020). As such it has powerful stakeholders including media with associated vested interest in the industry which may frustrate attempts to change the industry towards a new status quo. Changing the industry from within may therefore yield the best results when considering ethical change. This could be driven by a new leadership approach and a move toward corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical priorities.

Fulmer (2004) proved how ethical leadership is one of the main challenges within organisations in any sector, since there is a need to review and rebuild the company culture to connect vision and values. He also added that this is more challenging in education since to develop future balanced leaders, management courses must shift from mastery to discovery. Kim (2016) added that this requires pushing the students' thinking simultaneously inside and outside the box, visualising a "Newbox" that connects conceptualisation, expertise and critical reflection to scaffold original imagination. Those are the elements that define creativity as the ability of discovering and exploring new routes to produce new ideas, concepts, objects or simply reshaping them.

Considering the students' young age and inexperience, the biggest challenge is to identify and apply project management frameworks that can help lead them to enhance their creativity while unconsciously improving their leadership, employability and team-working skills.

When considering the 2030 SDG agenda, the potential framework used in the classroom to develop students' skills requires a departure from traditional top-down, hierarchical and linear approaches to innovative and adaptive approaches. A creative practical tool to review the organisation's priorities to balance the growth of people, planet and prosperity is required (UN, 2015). To succeed in the education process, it was important to not only engage individuals, but also a broad network of diverse creative minds to maximise innovation. This is what is called a Collaborative Systems Leadership (Dreier et al., 2019) where everyone wants to "Commit, Learn, Engage, Act and Review" to be effective in the SDG achievements. As Cropley (2011) confirmed, creativity in the classroom arises from the interplay of students' personal characteristics and the factors of environments in which learning takes place.

The design thinking method was selected to align the students with those leadership objectives. In fact, it has been defined in research as an iterative non-linear human-centric process that teams use to improve 'something' by creating innovative solutions through five steps: Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test (AIPM, 2021). Frequently called the 'learning by doing' method due to the step-by-step design behind the development of an object, it can create innovative solutions that answer consumers' needs, and therefore not strictly connected to a physical product (Gibbons, 2016). With origins going back to the 1960s, the term 'design thinking' was coined in the 1990s by David Kelley and Tim Brown of IDEO, bringing the framework into the mainstream (Friis Dam & Yu Siang, 2022).

The approach has also been used successfully within a business organisation to develop leadership skills. Martin (2004) identified the relevance of design thinking in changing the direction of organisational leadership: "Business people don't need to understand designers better: they need to be designers. They need to think and work like designers, have attitudes like designers, and learn to evaluate each other as designers do" (p. 10). It is evident that the method challenges not the ability to find a solution but the attitude within the decision process (Boland & Collopy, 2006). Therefore, by adding the ethics concept in evaluating each step of the decision, design thinking becomes a 'design attitude' which can help to build creative yet ethical leaders. Turner and Topalian (2002) introduced the design leadership concept reinforcing how critical it is for business leaders to grow a sense of responsibility by embracing a specific purpose in the overall structure. In particular, they identified six design leadership roles:

1. Envisioning the future
2. Manifesting strategic intent
3. Directing design investment
4. Managing corporate reputation
5. Creating and nurturing an environment of innovation
6. Training for design leadership

This was reinforced by McKinsey (2008) with the application of the 7s to the same method, where leaders have the role of defining the company values to generate empowerment, vision and driving change. However, there is no evidence of instructions which show how design thinking can become a planning tool to train leaders in business organisations. Furthermore, it has never been applied to the fashion industry as an ethical managerial method to achieve an SDG. Attempts to apply design thinking to fashion management have been made by Miller and Moultrie (2013), and Nixon and Blakley (2015), while Beckman and Barry (2007) used it as an innovative learning process in fashion. However, no one investigated it as an ethical tool to achieve SDGs.

In pedagogy around ethical management theories, design thinking derived from a methodology becomes a cultural way of thinking, therefore a combination of a mindset (Carroll, 2014) and a dynamic non-linear process (Serrat, 2010). Dunne and Martin (2006) confirmed that design thinking in management education drives students to investigate things in depth while understanding peers that work on the same project. It helps them see collaborative working as a way to make decisions based on evidence originated from different perspectives; it shows how to stay open-minded in each step of the process and is therefore flexible enough to consider powerful changes; it supports visualising a solution that does not exist already, satisfies client needs and achieves a return on investment (ROI). Serrat (2010) further explained that design thinking is "empathic, personal, subjective, interpretive, integrative, experimental, synthetic, pictorial, dialectical, opportunistic and optimistic" (p. 2) which means building creative confidence (Rauth et al., 2010) is essential for young adults. In education, it can be defined as "an orientation to learning that encompasses active problem solving and marshalling one's ability to create impactful change. It builds on the development of creative confidence that is both resilient and highly optimistic" (Kelly, 2012, p. 225). It is then a powerful method to develop students' leadership skills toward an ethical approach.

There are many studies already around the benefit of design thinking in education. Anderson (2013) and Anderson and Hajhashemi (2014) showed evidence of how it is a strategy for the learning environment since it enhances innovation and creativity through a peer-to-peer collaborative process. Melles et al.

(2014) applied the framework to embrace an inquiry-based learning approach, pushing people involved to stay open-minded and adapt to changes and Foster (2019) used it to develop teamwork problem-solving.

Looking at various applications in the work environment and education, design thinking was selected as the human-centred design approach to support groups of students in finding creative solutions to real-world problems. The goal was to show each young adult how to achieve an SDG by having a creative ethical approach. In any of the five steps of the design thinking framework, strategic project management tools were identified to improve and balance the associated people and action skills. This helped to make the process objective, creative, and replicable.

Methodology

This research focuses on three cohorts for a total of 130 students from Europe, Asia and Africa to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Research philosophy and design

Following on from the business goal and teaching method, interpretivism is the system selected to collect and analyse data for this case study. In fact, the students' reaction to the applied frameworks in any of the design thinking steps could be fully understood only with the researcher's empathetic interpretation of each group and individual (Finch & West, 1997). For example, data collection happened at different times for the three cohorts as explained in Table 1.

For an objective interpretivism, alongside the collection of final surveys and overall feedback, it was also essential for the researcher to record weekly notes and comments by using students' quotes to monitor the reaction and evolution of the groups and individuals.

Therefore, the research approach applied was inductive (Patton, 2002). The reality was actively changed by how the students acted and reacted while solving problems to achieve the goal. Therefore, it mirrored the human experience when applying the design thinking method. Pragmatism is then at the base of ontology and epistemology since it analyses the practical understandings and reaction in real-world issues (Patton, 2002) to develop the students' creative solutions under ethical leadership guidance. The study introduced a theoretical background, analysing design thinking within creativity and ethical leadership in the fashion industry and its application in education. Relevant theoretical project management frameworks and theories were selected for each step of the design thinking framework to track the students' journey toward developing their ethical skills. Alongside the literature review, collecting primary research data based on anonymous surveys, module evaluation questionnaires, and students' spontaneous verbal and written feedback during conferences and seminars was essential to understanding students' perceptions of the journey and growth at the end of the project.

Sampling technique, participants and collection steps

The research analysed 130 students in total from Europe, Asia and Africa to establish different views, draw observations and link to theory (Creswell, 2014). The method is explained below in Table 1.

Table 1 Sampling Technique, Time Horizon and Participants

Case Study Year 2	MEQ* week 8	Survey **		Verbal and written feedback on the Design Thinking Framework to develop creative skills toward an ethical leadership approach			Comment
		Before Marking	After Marking	Before Marking	Summer of Y2 ***	During Year 3	
2020 cohort 50 students	**Yes**					**Yes**	Students showed high maturity and solidity when leaving their feedback.
2021 cohort 45 students	**Yes**		**Yes**	Weekly quotes took from the researcher	**Yes**		Students were quite emotional when leaving their feedback, as under the influence of their marks.
2022 cohort 35 students	**Yes**	**Yes**		Weekly quotes took from the researcher	**Yes**		Students showed high maturity and reliability when they completed the form and left extremely honest and constructive feedback during the conference.

* Module Evaluation Questionnaire: this is the University standard survey that allows written feedback
** Survey designed by the researcher to evaluate the Design Thinking method
*** During the University Summer Conference

The survey designed for the research had 18 different questions, but always gave students the same four answers to choose from. The first two answers were people-oriented, and the second two were actions-oriented; in this way it was easier to identify students' tendencies and evolution when managing a project.

1. The team members as individuals, their approach, goals, personality and overall atmosphere.
2. The team's organisational structure, combined knowledge, roles, potential and ability to manage people effectively.
3. The objectives that need to be considered and achieved within the project.
4. The project structure, its development plan with milestones and the ability to manage activities and solutions effectively.

Thematic analysis

While it is easy to analyse the quantitative results connected to the module evaluation questionnaire and the survey, it is challenging to be objective when reviewing the qualitative input.

Therefore, the qualitative data evaluation and presentation process followed a four step process:

- record each verbal feedback and the 2020 cohort discussion
- transcribe
- identify the main themes by using an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke 2012).
- allocate content into the themes.

Ethical considerations

This research complies with Coventry University London and the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) ethics approval, and the researcher received a Certificate of Ethical Approval before collecting primary research data. In addition, it is read in the context of Data Protection Policy and Freedom of Information Policy, in line with other Professional Codes of Practice for research involving humans.
The researcher provided all the participants with the Information and Consent forms. The verbal and written feedback were collected online or face-to-face, where the researcher led the discussion to guarantee an inclusive approach without influencing the answers. Records and transcripts were provided.

This procedure ensured the awareness of the people involved, their voluntary participation, and their freedom to answer while respecting all the participants. It also guaranteed them the possibility to withdraw their data at any point without consequence. Moreover, the Coventry University London and UHI Research Ethics Framework reassured the participants that the data obtained from the interviews and focus group/s would be treated confidentially and stored safely on a secure server with a password, following the University guidelines.

The case study

Ethical creative goal

Year 2 BA students in International Fashion Marketing and Management at Coventry University London were asked to embrace one of the SDGs and create an online event to give suggestions and fresh ideas to the fashion industry on how to achieve it. The aim was to facilitate the students to practise ethical leadership skills when building a creative project with an emphasis on the 'how' as well as the goal itself. The introduction of an ethical decision-making process when managing innovative sustainable projects therefore becomes a key focus.

The case study involved three cohorts. The research analysed 130 students in total from Europe, Asia and Africa, developing three different online events around a specific SGD between 2020 and 2022. Each cohort was divided in 4 groups and had 10 weeks to deliver the event around a specific SDG as part of their module:

- 4th, Quality education – cohort 2020
- 10th, Reduce Inequalities – cohort 2021
- 13th, Climate Action – cohort 2022

Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes of developing an innovative event around a sustainable development goal are as follows:

- To apply the design thinking model to develop an ethical creative project that minimises the risk of failure and maximises the performance of the people involved
- To practise ethical leadership approaches whilst practising creativity in teamwork
- To critically analyse, reflect and build creative solutions for future development across a range of disciplines towards the SDG.

Ethical creative thinking method and steps

After a deep investigation in the literature review, and monitoring the first cohort in 2020 to identify what young leaders need to build a successful project in a real-world scenario, the design thinking framework was considered the best approach to be applied in 2021. It was believed it could achieve the project objectives while enhancing and respecting people's talent and self-realisation needs.

Figure 1 illustrates the five steps of the design thinking framework. Considering the final learning outcomes, it is essential to find a balance between people and action goals when moving from one step to another to succeed seamlessly in the project.

In each group of work, especially if made of individuals with little work experience, it is possible to find extremely people-oriented members and extremely action-oriented ones with a high chance of running into unproductive conflicts. Therefore, to set the base for the research, it was essential to identify the entry level of the students in terms of their people and action ethical leadership skills to select the appropriate project management frameworks for each step of the design thinking method. In particular, in all three Year 2 cohorts, after an initial discussion at the beginning of the term around their feelings towards teamworking and goals, four main limitations were identified when developing a group project.

1. Students with a lack of organisational and time management skills tend to rely only on relationships with people, applying last-minute deadlines instead of planning according to talents and structured timelines.
2. Students with a lack of KPI and profit knowledge tend to follow what other people in a team can achieve without clear goals, without driving the team to maximise its potential.
3. Students with a lack of communication skills tend to give orders or pass a list of actions to do without making sure that the message is perceived correctly, that there is commitment, or that the right talent is at work behind that activity.
4. Students with a lack of delegation skills, potentially perfectionists, with a lack of trust in peers and a highly competitive attitude, focus on actions and results. They are afraid of losing time and marks if everything is not done exactly how they have it in mind.

With these four issues in mind, (which are actually very common in any professional team as well) the plan was to help the students with limitation type 1 and 2 during the project understand the relevance of actions and plans; while helping group 3 and 4 understand the importance of people and so to see diversity as a strength. Otherwise, they would end up in cases 1 and 2 with an ethical approach without achieving the

SDG and event goals, and in cases 3 and 4 achieving SDGs and event goals but with no ethical approach (see Figure 1).

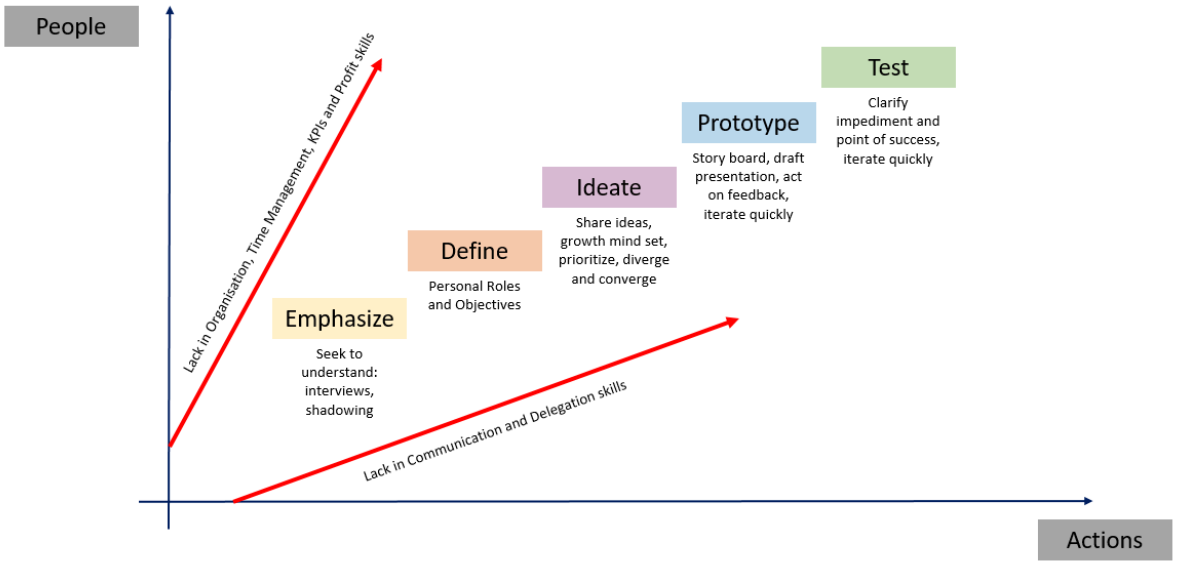

Figure 1 The five steps of the design thinking framework with people and actions skills not balanced – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

For this reason, in each of the five steps of design thinking, a strategic theoretical method or framework focussed on actions and people was applied to make the students realise where the problem was and how to improve it independently, with an ethical approach. As stated previously, to succeed in this application the lecture, like the leaders, did not provide solutions but created "opportunities for people to come together and generate their own answers" (Cooper & Nirenberg, 2012), making everyone become the protagonist of the success.

Step 1 - Emphasise: Research Method and Personal Branding

Week 1: Focus on *Emphasise*

"Empathy, by definition, is the intellectual identification with or vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another" (Proportion Global, nd). Therefore, the Emphasise step in the Design Thinking process requires the 'truth' about the target audience: who they are and what they are looking for. To be able to see through another person's eyes requires cultivating a strong sense of imagination, research and humility so preconceived ideas and biases may be abandoned.

Looking at the project aim, the target audience was divided into two main blocks: the global fashion industry on one side and the students involved on the other side. The collection of 'true' information about the audience was then essential to push the students to practise two skills during their first week of the module (See Appendix 1, Figure 1).

- *Research Method* (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2012): asking them to analyse in depth what the SDG wanted to achieve, what the fashion industry is already doing in the right direction, and so find innovative ideas and proposals to support the positive change. Identify the best primary and secondary research methods to develop the project.

- *Personal Branding* (Ilies, 2018): asking each student to position themselves as an independent entrepreneur. From just learners they have to become self-motivated professionals able to maximise expectations and efficiency.

Each cohort was divided into four groups and had 10 weeks to deliver the event around a specific SDG. In each group, the students instinctively more action-oriented started their research. Their challenge was more about delegating and updating the others, since they didn't investigate how this task connected their needs and expectations to the rest of the team. To the contrary, the students who were more people-oriented did the opposite, brainstorming with basic supporting data.

For each group presentation after the first week, the proposal was innovative. However thanks to the feedback received from lecturer and peers, they realised how much a more solid reference list was needed. Also, there was also a lack of connections between elements. They thought that the aim at this stage was more to get the job done to impress the lecturers and peers with great ideas.

Step 2: Define: Gantt Chart, Mind Mapping and Belbin 9 boxes

Week 2: focus on *Define*.

This is where the team members of each group examine their perceptions to integrate them with external users and their needs, using a different lens to create a structured plan. Therefore, the students were asked to use the following frameworks (See Appendix 1, Figure 2):

- *Belbin* (1993; 2010). The students were asked to get to know each other more in-depth and investigate the skills they could bring to the project and the skills each of them wanted to gain from the project. Therefore, The Belbin 9-talent matrix was essential.
- *Mind Mapping* (Arulselvi, 2017). The students were asked to use a visual diagram to capture the project structure and ideas and divide the responsibilities according to current and potential individual talent development
- *Gantt Chart* (Clark, 1922; British Library, 2022). Immediately after the mind mapping, (between week 2 and 3) the students were asked to create a detailed chart of the project structure, with responsibilities and deadlines.

Figure 2 illustrates how applying the Belbin framework, in addition to the personal branding of the previous step, made them aware that, without satisfying both personal and project expectations, potentials and needs, they would have never achieved the audience goals. This analysis unconsciously pushed the students who were naturally against the organisation to seek people planning. Utilising mind mapping and Gantt charts, alongside research method, pushed the students who were naturally against delegation to see collaboration as a strength in the project.

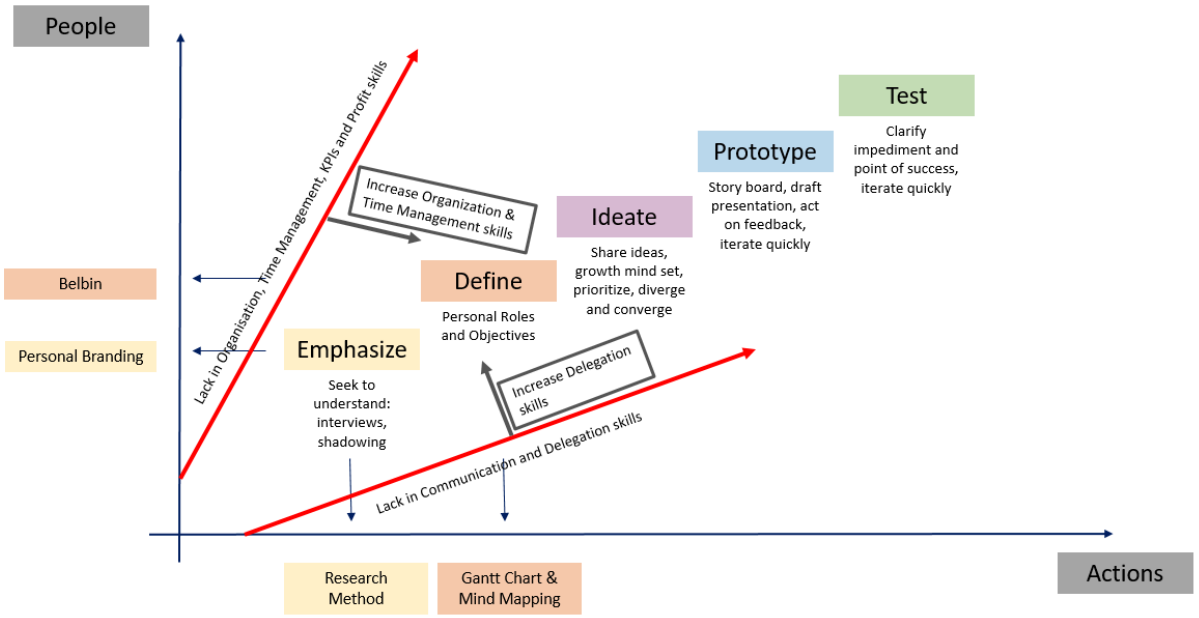

Figure 2 Design thinking framework step 2 Define: Belbin, Mind Mapping and Gantt Chart increase organisation, time management and delegation skills – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

In the Define step, they all started to see that in business it is important to plan based on talents and deadlines, giving each team member clear responsibilities to achieve objectives (see Appendix 2 for figures).

Step 3: Ideate: McKinsey 7S, Tuckman and Hofstede Cultural Framework

The focus of weeks 3 and 4 was *Imagination*. Embracing the deep purpose of the project at 360 degrees while empowering stakeholders and their diverse solution ideas as a strength was essential to develop a creative ethical approach to achieve an SDG.

In this step, the team members needed to generate innovative solutions to achieve the project goals and satisfy the audience without forgetting that the stakeholders were external as well as internal. Here, the frameworks applied, awakened the students towards the importance of applying an ethical leadership approach when achieving an SDG (See Appendix 1, Figure 3):

- *McKinsey 7s* (2008): Pushing the students to structure the entire project creativity around clear values made them unconsciously constantly monitor if the creative ideas were at the same time applicable and achievable in real life while meeting the audience's objectives. McKinsey focuses on developing an easy planning framework to diagnose how people are operating while providing effective tools for change.
- *Stakeholder Map, Tuckman and Hofstede Cultural Framework* (Tuckman, 1965; Association for Project Management, 2019; Hofstede, 2022): Those essential people-oriented theories at this stage of the project gave the students the tools to evaluate and achieve their team's maturity and ability to work at their full potential.

Step 4 - Prototype: Feedback, Feedforward and Presentation skills

Between weeks 4 and 5, the students started to build their prototypes.

At the beginning of week 6, the students had their first assessment submission, which consisted of the group presentation of their event plan and their individual reflection on the project so far. As the framework was in the prototype step, this was the opportunity for the students to think and answer questions that evaluated their proposal to date and got them closer to the final event proposal. At this stage, the essential elements to insert in the design thinking framework were (See Appendix 1, Figure 4):

- *Feedback and Feedforward* (Jisc, 2013): A combination of both feedback and feedforward helps ensure that the outcoming assessment has a developmental impact on learning (Jisc, 2014), and it becomes "arguably the most powerful enhancement to learning" (Biggs & Tang, 2007). By adding open-ended questions in the approach they also developed critical thinking skills. "Feedback is a dialogic process in which learners make sense of information from varied sources and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies" (Carless, 2015).
- *Presentation skills* (Harvey et al., 2014; Hamilton, 2008): The students were required to deliver a plan and innovative ideas effectively, to identify different talents and roles when presenting, and to rehearse in a team while managing expectations, goals and time.

In this case, the purpose of the presentation was to cover all the relevant points in education (Chivers & Shoolbred, 2007): persuasion skills, training before the day, teaching and learning by looking at the research behind the idea, informing and assessment. Therefore, in the prototype stage, the students clearly achieved a high level of engagement, creating a constant constructive dialogue with all the stakeholders involved to build a professional environment.

In between the ideate and prototype steps, students with a lack of communication and time management skills confirmed that the frameworks pushed them to find a more robust balance between people and action skills (Figure 3).

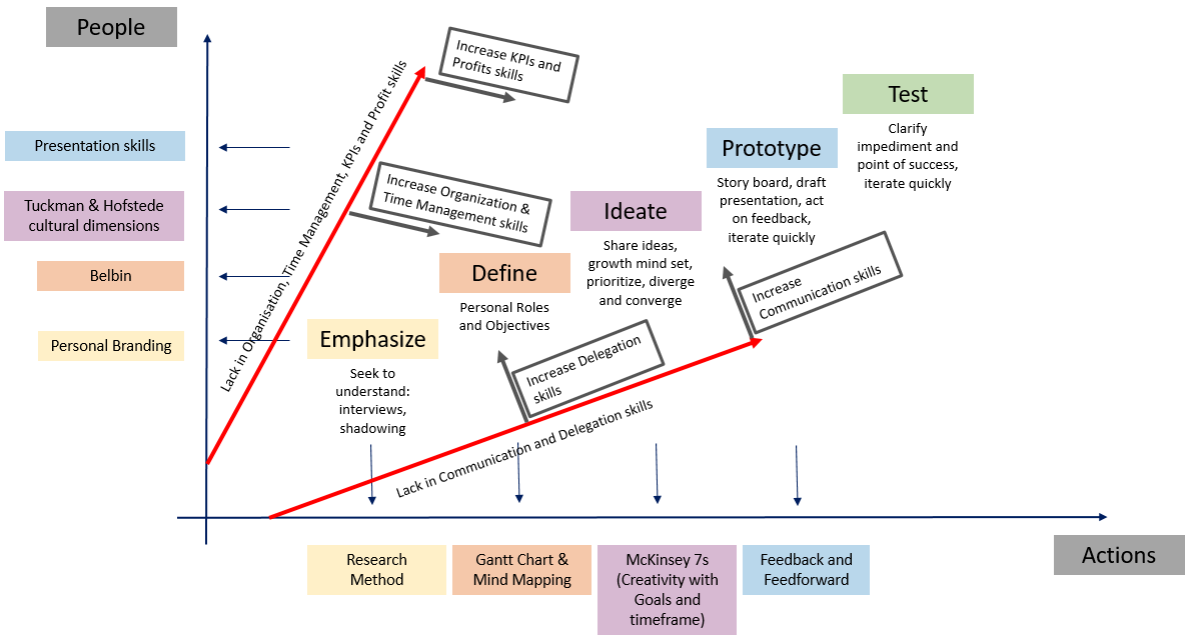

Figure 3 Design thinking framework step 4 Prototype: Feedback and Feedforward and Presentation Skills increase business and communications skills – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

Step 5 - Test: KPIs, Marking and Self-Assessment. The D-Day

In week 10, the event day arrived.

The students had three weeks between the prototype and the test. This time helped them optimise the resources, research, and finalise the event, taking into consideration all the feedback and feedforward elements from the previous step.

The purpose of testing is to learn what works and what doesn't and then iterate. Therefore, here is where it is possible to compare what has been achieved versus the original plan.

KPI (Varouchas et al.,2018): On one side there are the project KPIs, for example, how many people were invited and how many are present; or what is the satisfaction rate of the audience. The students established 4-5 KPIs to be able to evaluate the project goals against the stakeholders involved (see Appendix 3, Figure 1).

Marking and Self-Assessment (Nieminena et al.,2021): The leaders of each project were asked to evaluate themselves and the other team members during the project building and delivery. In particular, they had to evaluate three points in the marking rubric equal to 30% of their overall mark: research, critical application and engagement. Their marks proposal was then discussed and agreed upon with the teaching team (see Appendix 3, Figure 2).

The overall process performance improved step by step, with each member's ability to balance people and actions, making the process successful in terms of content and approach (see Appendix 1, Figure 5). Therefore, students that at the beginning of the project were mainly people oriented, developed stronger business and KPI planning skills because they could see how a properly structured action could enhance people's talent. Students that at the beginning of the project were mainly action oriented, developed delegation and communication skills because they could see how a proper people approach could maximise the project potential.

Reflection with an Action and People Plan

At the end of the process, as part of the CW2, the students were asked to look back and reflect. This is where Gibbs's framework (1998) came in handy to support them, giving a learning journey structure to build a people and action-oriented plan for the future (Figure 4).

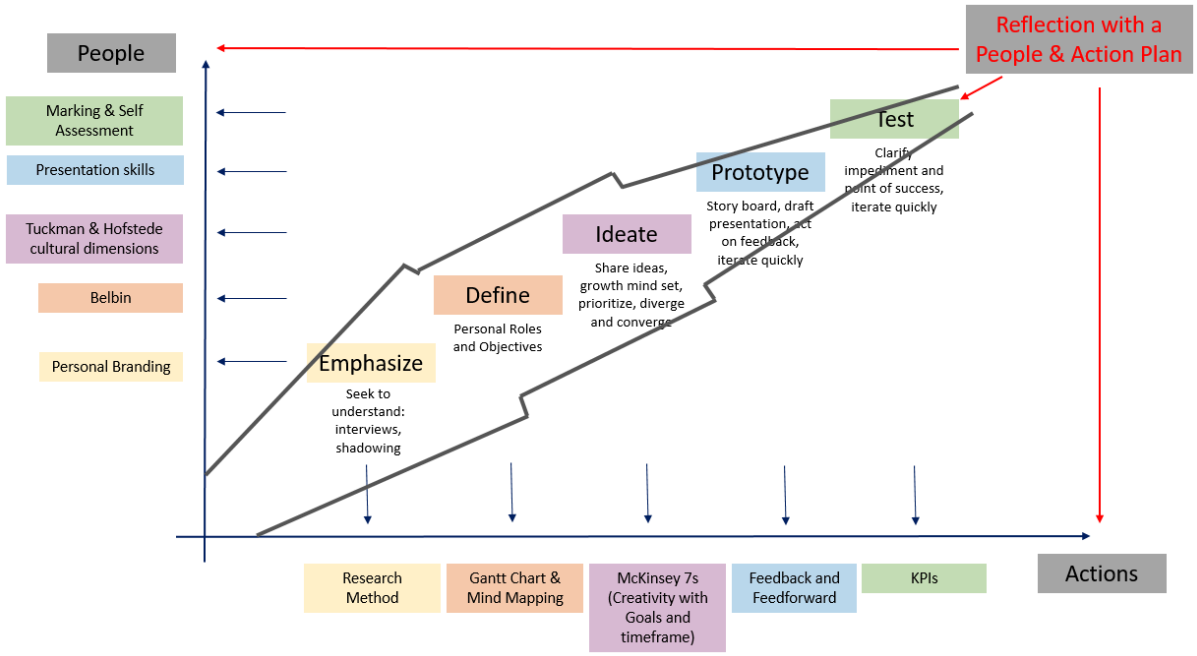

Figure 4 Design thinking framework ends with a reflection and a people-action plan – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

Data analysis: Results and discussion

As from Table 1, This case study has been developed and judged by students in real-time, before and after marking, and also in verbal and written feedback, therefore giving them all the needed space to be completely honest in their comments.

Survey results and discussion

As from Table 1, the surveys were conducted immediately at the end of the project, before marking for the 2022 cohort but after marking for the 2021 cohort. However, no survey was conducted for the 2020 cohort since that first year was just experimental to define the skills and needs of BA level 5.

Appendix 4 shows in detail the 24 answers of the 2022 cohort, while appendix 5 the 35 answers of the 2021 cohort. However, table 2 below clearly compared the two year's answers, underlining how some frameworks inserted in the design thinking steps were key for both in developing specific skills.

Table 2 Survey results 2021 vs 2022

	PM o DPM	Creative Leader	Marketing/PR Leader	Creative Member	Marketing Member
Which one was your role inside the project?					
2021 - 35 Students	4	6	6	12	7
2022 - 24 Students	2	4	5	8	5
	Team Members	Team Organisation	Project Objective	Project Structure	TOTAL ANSWER
First element when choosing the project					
2021	8	12	7	8	35
2022	4	10	4	6	24
First element you focussed on when starting					
2021	6	14	8	7	35
2022	5	8	5	6	24
Most important element to succeed					
2021	10	10	6	9	35
2022	7	6	4	7	24
Most relevant to develop problem-solving skills					
2021	8	7	12	8	35
2022	6	4	9	5	24
Most relevant to develop leadership skills					
2021	9	17	2	7	35
2022	3	14	2	5	24
Most relevant to develop communication					
2021	15	9	7	4	35
2022	10	6	6	2	24
The most engaging element					
2021	10	7	8	10	35
2022	8	6	4	6	24
The most challenging element					
2021	16	4	6	9	35
2022	10	2	5	7	24
Where research method had bigger impact					
2021	3	9	12	11	35
2022	3	7	9	5	24
Where individual creativity had bigger impact					
2021	14	6	6	9	35
2022	11	3	4	6	24
Where clear and strict rules had bigger impact					
2021	2	13	10	10	35
2022	2	10	7	5	24

Where the team diversity was most impactful					
2021	17	8	4	6	35
2022	11	7	3	3	24
Key element to grow as individual/professional					
2021	7	11	7	10	35
2022	5	6	6	7	24
Key element to make ready for Y3					
2021	5	11	9	10	35
2022	4	7	6	7	24
What are you most proud of					
2021	7	10	7	11	35
2022	5	6	4	9	24
Where focus on more to do it all over again					
2021	12	7	8	8	35
2022	9	5	5	5	24

In particular, the first interesting comparison is how both years focused more at the beginning on Team Organisations, therefore defining people roles. When asked "where would they start from if they were to do it all over again?", the answer for both was Team members and also on Project Objective. This confirmed how, without understanding each member's talent and overall goals, it is not possible to build an effective organisation and create innovative solutions.

In addition, when they were asked what they were proud of, both confirmed that Team Organisation and Project Structure were their biggest achievements, which means that they became aware of how challenging it is to develop skills towards achieving innovative objectives and to maximise each individual's potential.

3 What was the first element you took into consideration when choosing the project you wanted to contribute to?

2021 cohort answer

2022 cohort answer

18 Thinking about the project outcomes, which element would you develop or focus on more effectively if you had to do it all over again?

2021 cohort answer

2022 cohort answer

17 Looking back at the project, what are you most proud of?

2021 cohort answer

2022 cohort answer

Interestingly both cohorts confirmed that the most engaging element was dealing with Team Members, because they helped in developing communication skills and increasing the project creativity. Both cohorts saw diversity as an essential part of the project's success. However, they also confirmed how defining clear rules was key to managing each talent and responsibilities and this was not easy.

2021 cohort answer

12 In which element free-thinking, creativity and innovation embracing the ideas of each member had a more positive impact?

2022 cohort answer

When it came to leadership skills development, both cohorts answered that Team Organisation was the essential element; while in increasing their problem-solving abilities, the Project Objective was what pushed them out of their comfort zone.

7 What was the most relevant element to support and develop your leadership skills?

2021 cohort answer

2022 cohort answer

It can be concluded that despite the fact that the survey was run at different times, both cohorts were aligned on the relevant frameworks that scaffold their future ethical creative leadership skills. The only clear difference was the answer to question 16, where the 2021 cohort confirmed that Team Organisation is relevant to building skills Y3, while the 2022 cohort - that had had more time to think - replied that the project structure is more relevant.

16 What was the key element that made the most important impact in getting ready for Y3?

2021 cohort answer

2022 cohort answer

Themes: Results and discussion

Verbal and written feedback was taken from the students in 2020, 2021 and 2022 on a weekly basis, and notes and quotes from the researcher. The 2020 cohort also shared proper feedback during Year 3, while the 2021 and 2022 cohorts joined the Coventry University London staff conferences, talking about how the projects developed their Ethical Creative Leadership skills.

Theme 1: Key frameworks in the Design Thinking that most develop People skills

From the 2021 cohort.

> At some point you don't see peers or students anymore. You see a united business group where everyone has different life goals within the projects like in a real-life working environment. Someone like me wants to achieve high results and be proud of the project creation, while someone else just wants to spend the minimum possible effort. In the beginning I got upset about this but then I realised that we all have different backgrounds and a different role in the stakeholders' map so I simply made sure that no matter the contribution, we were all aligned in terms of project values and quality of delivery. It did work. And when I stopped getting upset, saying that I was working more than others and instead I started to thank everyone for their contributions, all the other team members felt respected and started to be naturally more committed, bringing the group research to a higher level.
>
> Giving and receiving opinions was hard. It is easy to understand the meaning of constructive feedback and feedforward, but not easy to apply it when your peer is your friend and you don't want to create enemies around you. Well, with the weeks passing by and when assessing colleagues, I realised that [it] is essential to stay objective and the only way is to use evidence. Nothing is personal, everything must improve the business results and the personal development if possible."
>
> Patience while making clear requests and giving each other precise responsibilities helped us to achieve an outcome I am proud of. In the beginning I was doing everything myself, including details like transforming the reference list into the APA style; then I realised that I was not achieving a better result in this way but I was only working more intensively and alone. Looking at Belbin and the mind mapping I decided to delegate. It was not easy, but it is essential to make everyone feel a proactive part of the project. It also made me feel inclusive, which was also the SDG we needed to achieve.

From the 2022 cohort: "I realised that allocating responsibilities to people according to their talent would make everyone more proactive, building long-term relationships".

> Giving each other feedback and marking made me realise that I needed evidence. It doesn't matter if you are a leader or not in a project, to make sure your ideas move forward you need evidence that meets the project and team member's values.

Theme 2: Key frameworks in the Design Thinking that most develop Action skills

From the 2021 cohort: "At the beginning it was mainly about peer-to-peer relationships and trying to be friends with everyone, while around week 4 the focus increased on project objectives and time management".

> Finding the balance between my personal, team members and event goals was challenging. As a leader … I saw this as a fight between my instincts, feedback and data. Then slowly I realised that, by applying diverse frameworks to manage the team members and their ideas, I became more rational when making decisions. I felt empowered and able to give reliable explanations every time for any of the decisions made.

From the 2022 cohort.

> Only when I translated the SDG values into the way I was actually creating the event I realised that I was on the right track. An SDG is not an external goal, but an internal one that must start with how we want to achieve our goals.
>
> I now clearly see the connection between SDG and ethics. I feel like I have the tools to make a difference in the real world and bring positive changes to an organisation by starting from their culture and how they approach the relationship between people and profits.

Conclusion

The survey and feedback results aligned with how the use of different frameworks in different stages played a specific role in building students' skills and improving their original tendency towards people or actions. In particular, for each part of the project, the students found, according to their talent, that some frameworks were more relevant or more challenging, and therefore they were able to balance the diversity of the students' talent.

From the 2022 cohort.

> Making sure everyone was contributing effectively was not easy, but it was something that I have learned, since, in the beginning I was doing everything by myself. I had to become very patient to achieve this since everyone has a different speed and commitment. Belbin and the KPI map helped me a lot in this process.

Lessons learned, limitations and next steps

As underlined in the literature review, theories and good intentions are not enough to achieve ethical leadership. It is necessary to scaffold a "Newbox" by connecting profits, creativity and ethical frameworks into processes, easily applicable by current or future managers.

Embedding in the design thinking framework a variety of project management methods, proved that towards the end of the process students started to find the balance between people and actions when leading or building innovative solutions. This created confidence and a positive approach towards their next entry into the job market. The positive feedback and the Module Evaluation result, from 80% in 2020 to

100% in 2022, confirmed the students' appreciation of the replicable project management process, which awakened their creative ethical leadership skills.

The data collection and analysis could show some limitations in terms of sampling and timing e.g. the fact that the cohorts were investigated at different times of the term and by using different quantitative and qualitative tools. If on one hand it doesn't allow objective comparison of all the data, on the other hand it created an interesting variety of reactions and feedback, some more emotional, some more rational and solid, but overall, all positive.

Recommendations drawn from this case study are:

- Lecturers should neither overwhelm the students with theories nor force too many rules and limitations. This helps to enable a continuous balance between people and actions;
- Be inclusive and authentic when approaching the process. This will create opportunities for dialogues, debates, feedback and feedforward to drive ethical creativity and innovation in a multicultural global environment;
- The class has to experience real-life issues. The design thinking method with the frameworks at each step should be applied on a relevant topic for the students so that the research, the brainstorming, and the reflection during the journey are authentic;
- It is important that the students have the opportunity to discover and practice using the relevant tools according to their own reality. This will enable them to learn and to become solution-oriented which will ultimately make an impact on the industry they eventually enter;
- Evaluate the students journey with survey and feedback before the Design Day, immediately after the Design Day and at the end of the following term, to remove bias and emotional opinions connected to the assessments results.

Biographies

Giulia Massera is a Senior Lecturer in fashion management, focusing on building effective learning environments for students while embedding employability competencies such as innovation and sustainability. Prior to moving into HE, she had more than 25 years of professional experience driving international business growth, developing and retaining talents through an ethical leadership approach.
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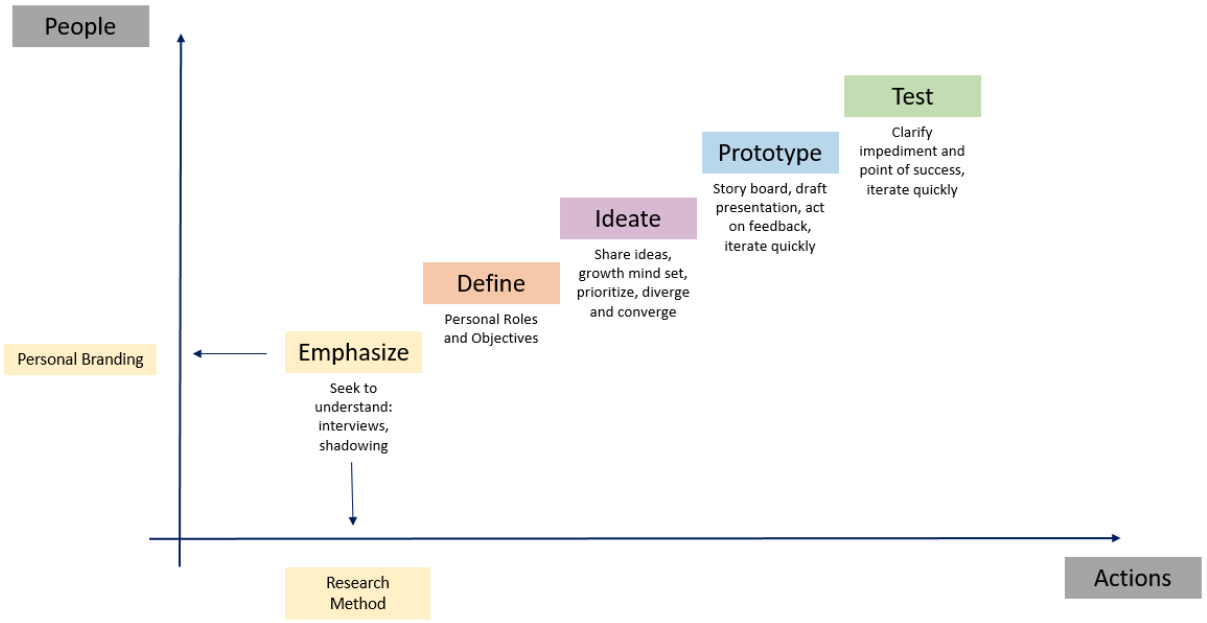
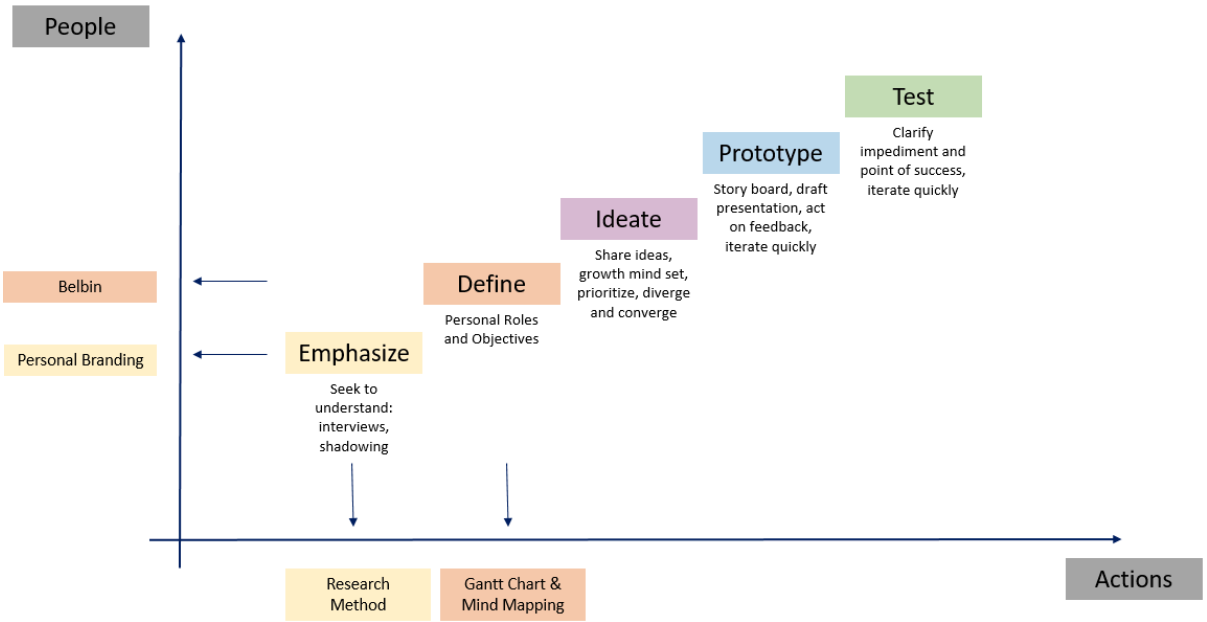
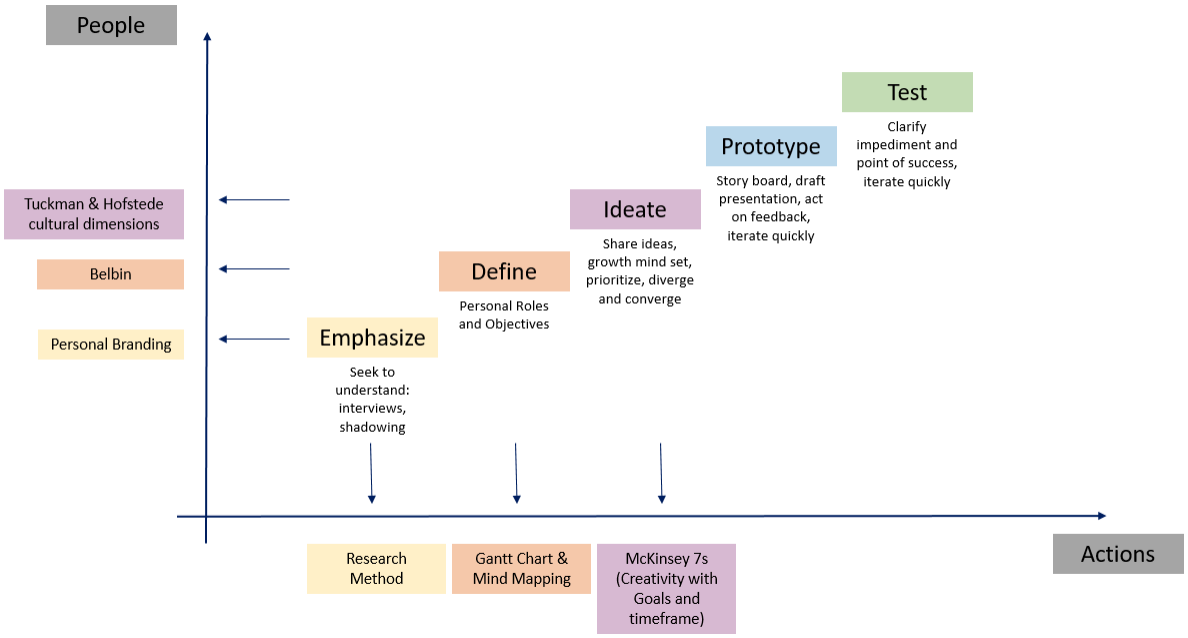
Appendix I



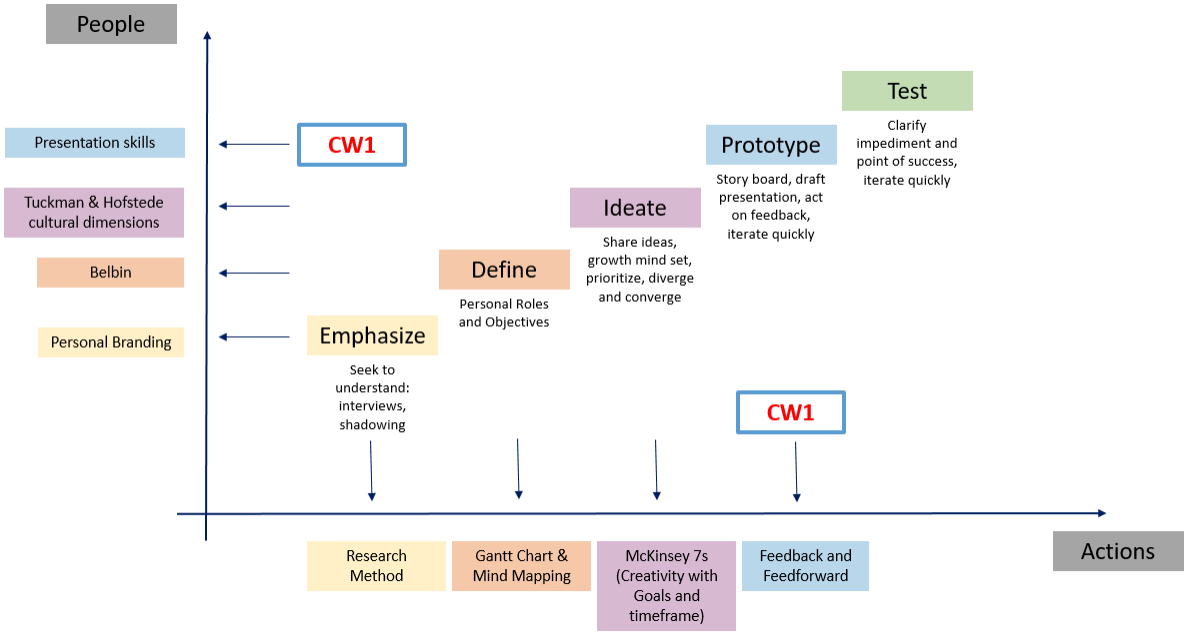
Appendix 1, Figure 1. Design thinking framework step 1 Emphasise: Research Method and Personal Branding – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."



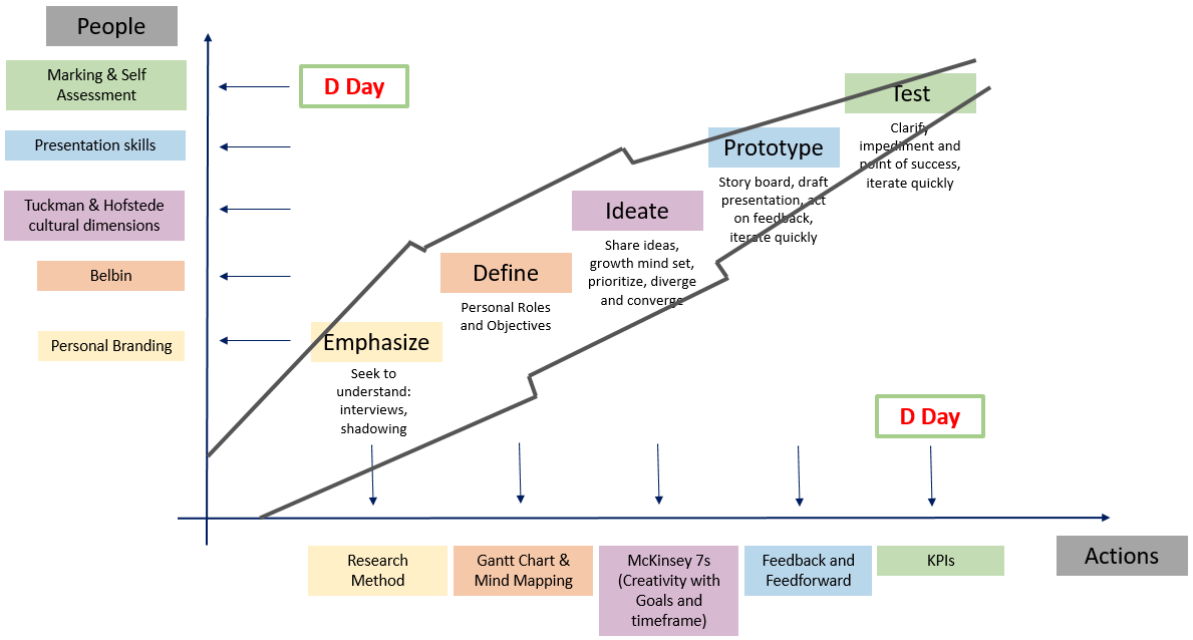
Appendix 1, Figure 2. Design thinking framework step 2 Define: Belbin, Mind Mapping and Gantt Chart – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."



Appendix 1, Figure 3. Design thinking framework step 3 Ideate: McKinsey 7s, Stakeholders' Map, Tuckman and Hofstede cultural compass – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."



Appendix 1, Figure 4. Design thinking framework step 4 Prototype: Feedback and Feedforward and Presentation Skills – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."



Appendix 1, Figure 5. After the 5 steps, the design thinking framework shows how people and action-oriented students, thank the project management frameworks applied, moved toward the centre, developing stronger abilities to balance people and profits needs – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

Appendix 2

In the figure below, it is possible to see an example of how Belbin and Gantt Chart can connect individual talents with action to be delivered.

Activity	Sub activity	Talent needed	People in charge	WEEK 5							WEEK 6						
				24	25	26	27	28	29	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Creativity Team																	
Event Project Design																	
	Design Layout Event Room		name														
	Display Creativity Event Room	Creativity and Photoshop	name														
	Plan material/furniture needed for the event	Creativity, Planning and Budgeting	name														
	Event Uniform	Photoshop and Budgeting	name														
Format Communication																	
	Event Logo	Branding and Photoshop	name														
	Poster	Branding, Photoshop and Communication	name														
	Brochure	Branding, Photoshop and Communication	name														
	On-line communication format for social, newsletter	Branding, Communication, Planning	name														

Figure Belbin and Gantt Chart increase organisation, time management and delegation skills – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

The same goal is illustrated in the next figure with Belbin and Mind Mapping.

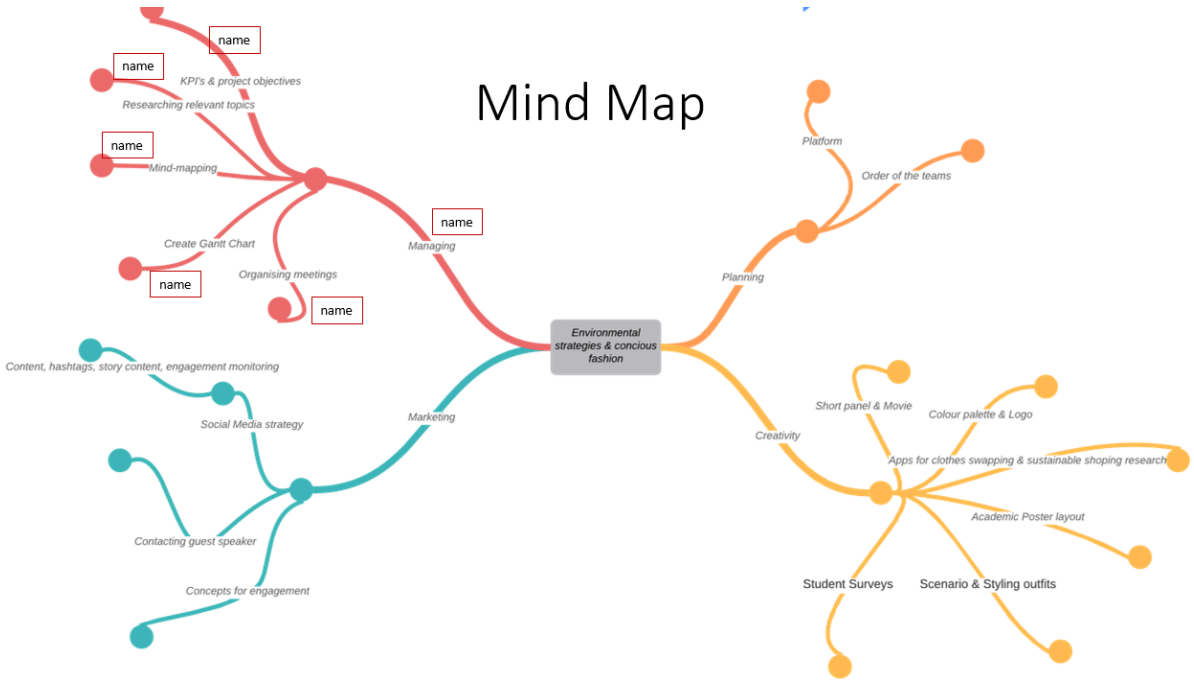


Figure Belbin and Mind Mapping increase organisation, time management and delegation skills – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

Appendix 3

Example of students establishing 4/5 KPIs to be able to evaluate the project goals against the stakeholders involved:

Objectives	Target	Strategies to Achieve Goals	Measures	KPIs
1)Reach people from inside and outside of Coventry University regarding the event	Reach 100 followers on Instagram with 20 people liking the account's posts until the 30th March.	Use Hashtags, follow relevant people, post on weekly basis to inform and engage about the event and the importance of reducing inequalities in our society	•Account's engagement analytics	•Number of people liking post and engaged with stories •Number of followers gained
2) Successfully promote the event to the target audience interested to the event	Sell 50 tickets on Eventbrite until the 30th March.	Use interactive social media posts that will inform people about the event activities and topics	•Number of ticket sold	•Number of attendees to the event
3) Reaching a wide range of people to take part in the "Customer Consumption Targets" survey	Engage 30 people in the "Customer Consumption Targets" survey until 1st March.	•Post the survey on the Aula community page to all the fashion courses in CULC •Share the survey with family and friends within the target audience	•Live survey response rate	•Number of people that took the survey
4) Raise awareness about the event by driving people to use the #ThisIsMyStyle for their posts	Have 20 people post an instagram post with #ThisIsMyStyle until 30th March	• Using #ThisIsMyStyle in our posts and engaging people to do the same to boost social media traffic • Share the hashtag in the CULC aula page to invite students to participate	•The amount of people posting with the hashtag	•Number of people who Used the hashtag in their posts
5) To create an event that is interesting and informative for the target audience	Recieve positive feeback from 25 people after the event on an instagram poll by the end of the poll (24 hours).	By interacting with the attendees and interacting with them on live event Q&A	•Poll rate after the 24 hours	• Number of people that gave positive responses to the poll

Appendix 3, Figure 1 - Example of project KPIs that supported the students increasing business skills – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

The Figure below illustrates examples of constructive feedback given by one group of leaders following two points of the rubric:

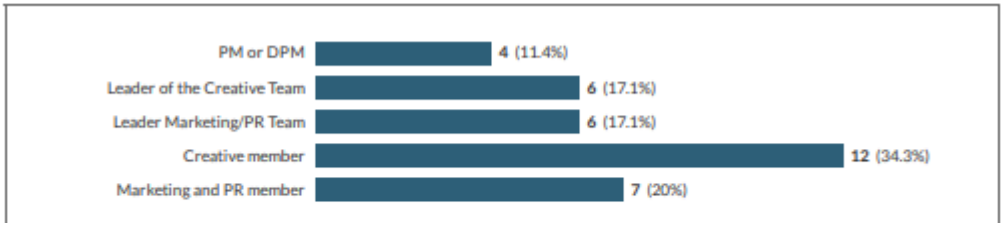
Name	Criterion 1 - Knowledge and understanding	Explanation	Criterion 5 - Engagement	Explanation
xxx	8	Excellent use of credible sources gathered from fashion articles, books and blogs. A clear understanding of the overall project aims and how to achieve them. Providing clear rationale for ideas and how to improve them.	9	Outstanding engagement, always participating in meetings, willing to have additional meetings, acting on feedback constantly, filling out the meeting minutes, supporting leaders, taking up more tasks, bringing new ideas constantly and being critical when providing feedback.
xxx	5	Reasonable use of credible sources, mainly sourced from websites and some articles, clearly understanding the overall project.	5	Reasonable engagement, not participating in all but some meetings, willing to act on feedback, mainly doing the tasks individually rather than in a team during meetings.
xxx	7	Strong use of credible sources, using a broad range of sources from articles and blogs and finding inspiration for the project on different platforms. A clear understanding of the overall project, providing a clear rationale for actions.	8	Always willing to help, acting on feedback & attending & engaging in all the meetings, supporting leaders, watching all the recordings from leader's meetings, and willing to constantly improve and bring new ideas.
xxx	4	Basic understanding of the project and tasks, limited use of sources gathered from main websites.	4	Basic engagement in the meetings, missing meetings but sending apologies, willing to participate in tasks when asked and asking questions only after the meetings. Acting on feedback only last minute.

Appendix 3, Figure 2 - Example students' self-assessment made in groups – by the author "©2022 Giulia Massera. Used with permission."

Appendix 4

Survey result cohort 2021

2.b Which one was your role inside the project?



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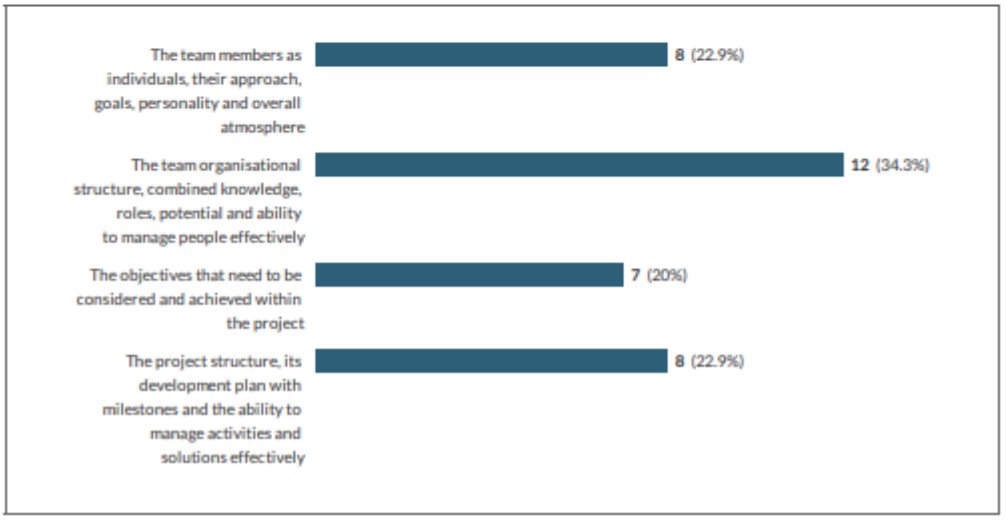

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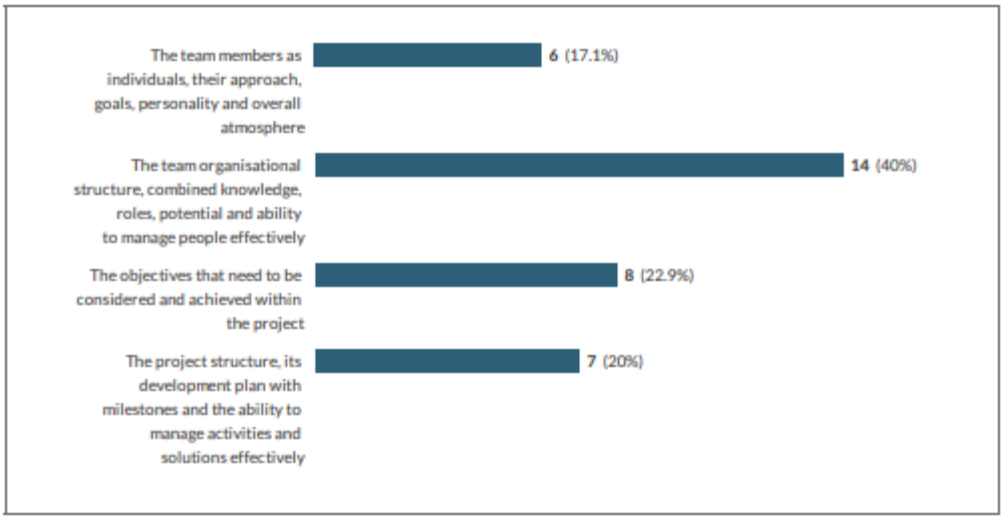
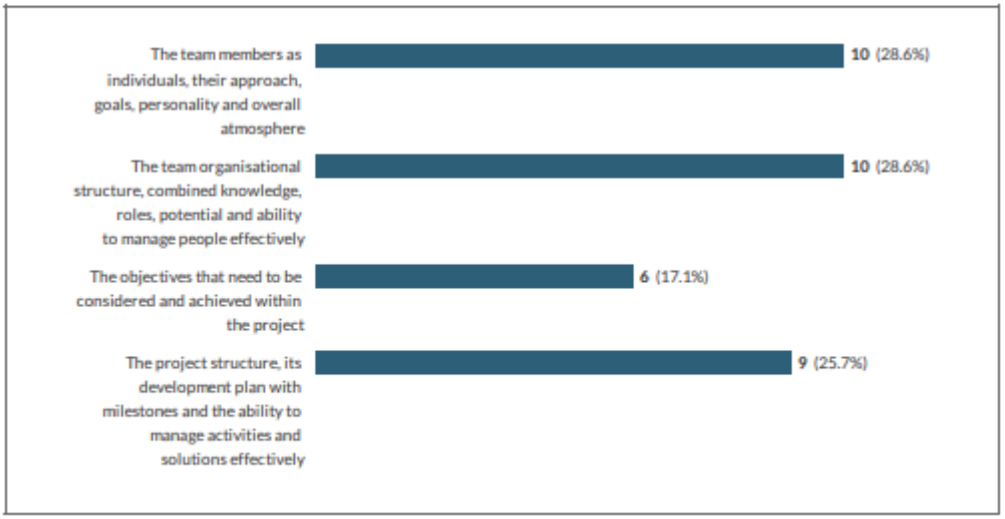
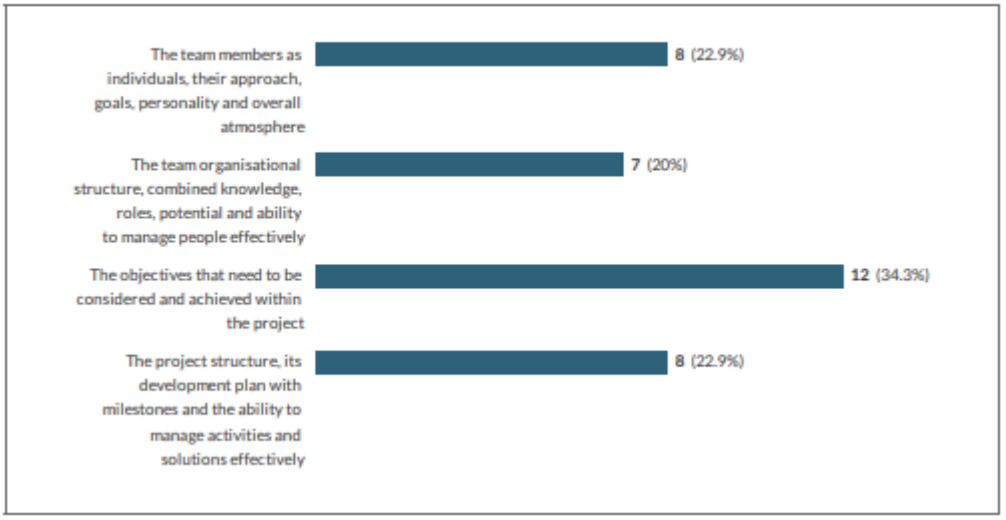


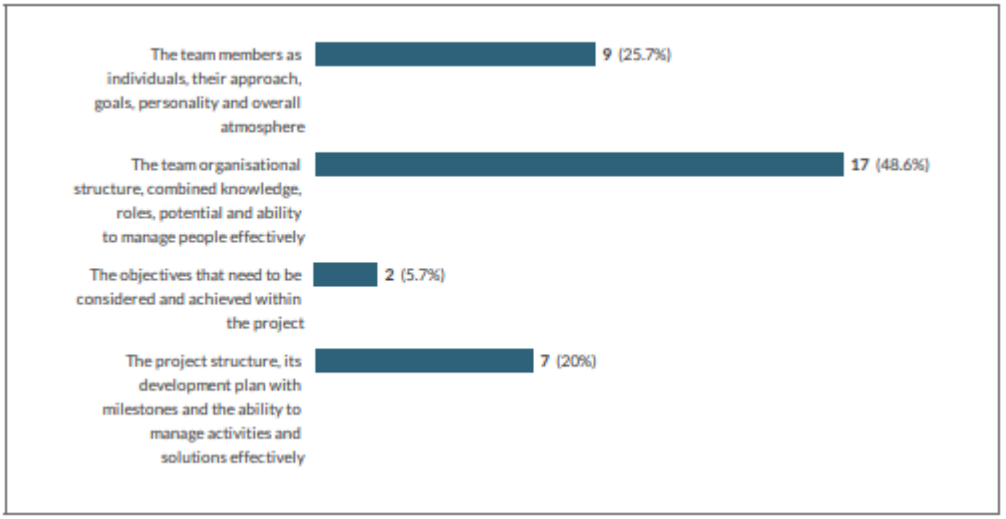
5 What was the most important element that helped the project succeed?



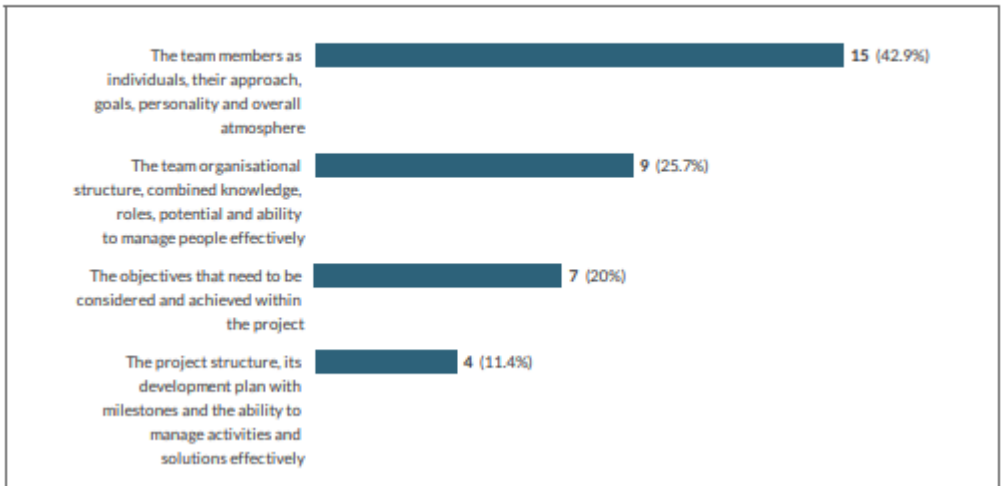
6 What was the most relevant element to support and develop your problem-solving skills?



7 What was the most relevant element to support and develop your leadership skills?



8 What was the most relevant element to support and develop your communication skills?



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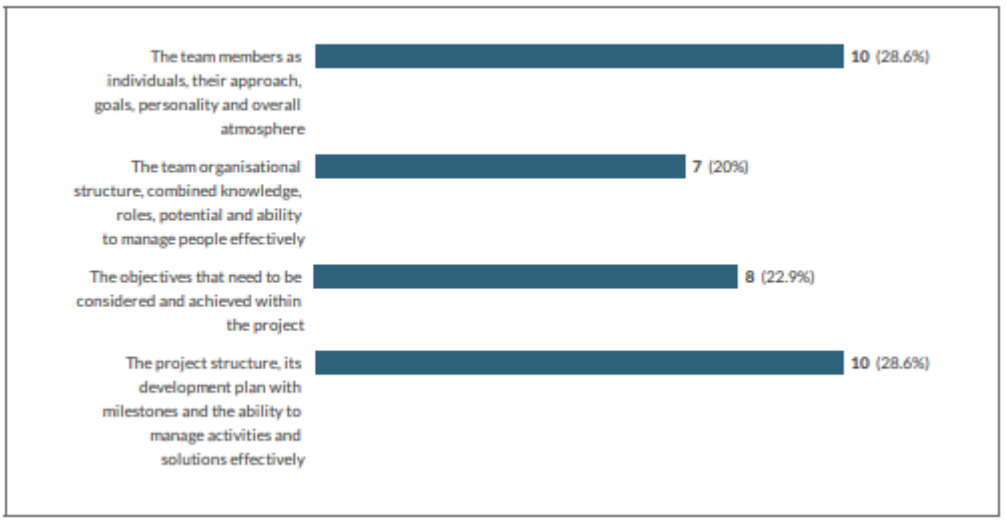

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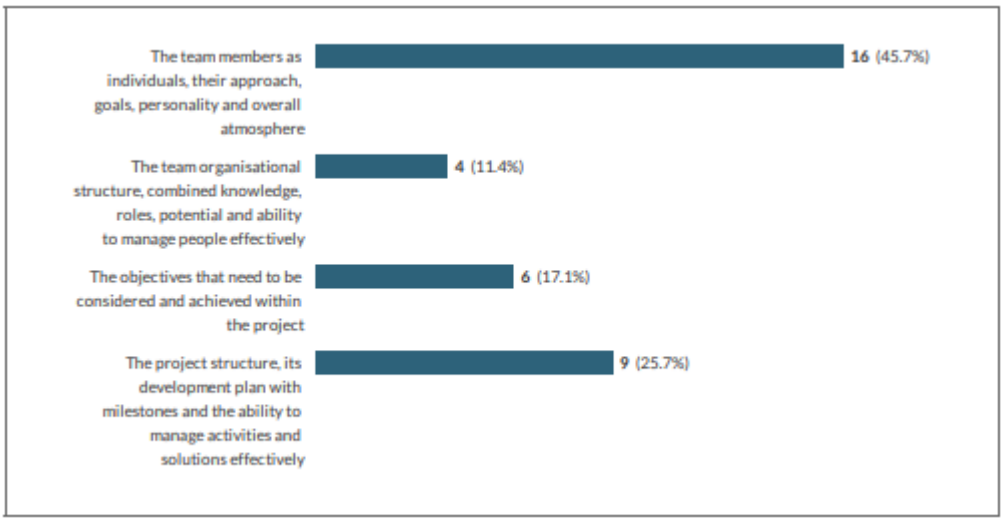
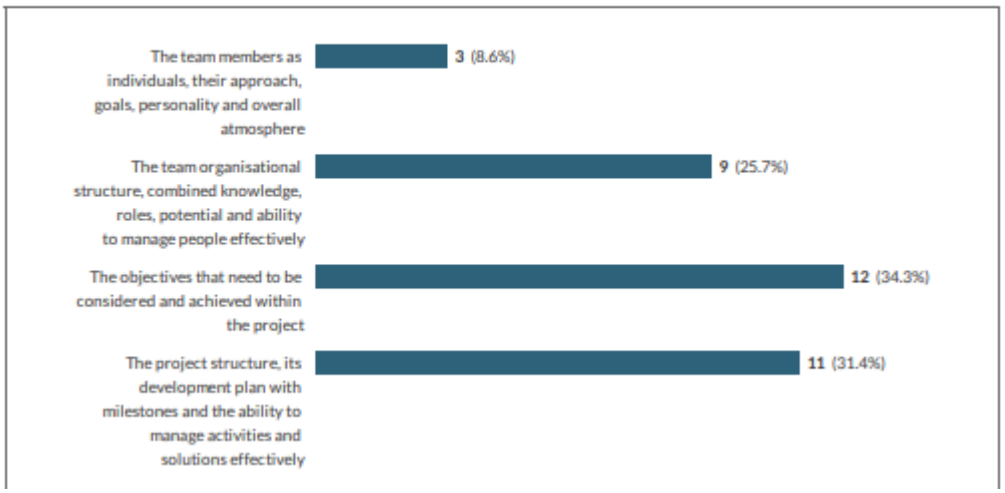


11 In which element apply a strong research method had a more positive impact?



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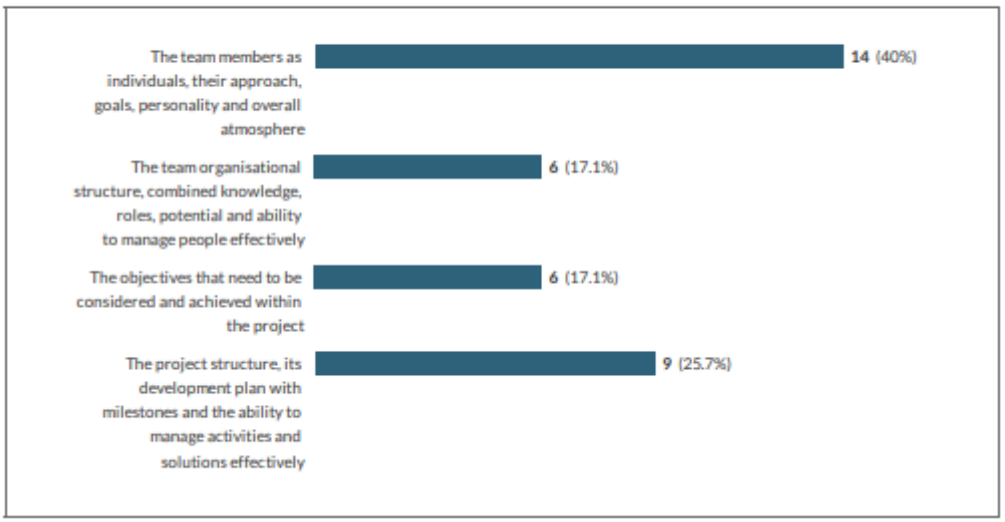
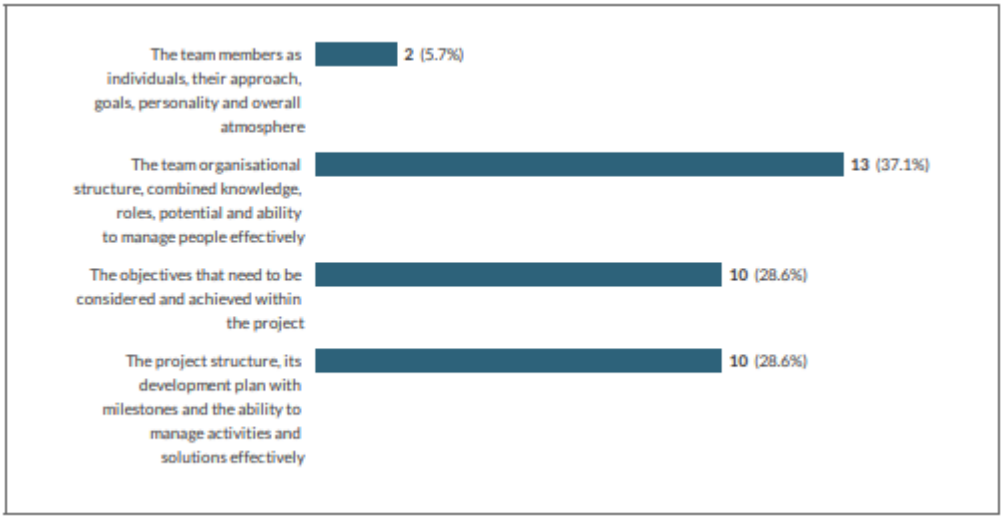
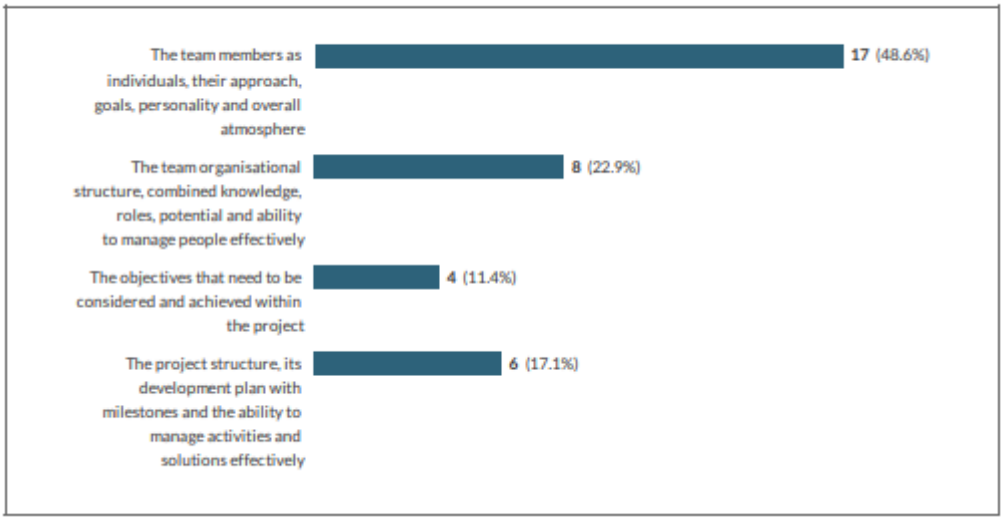


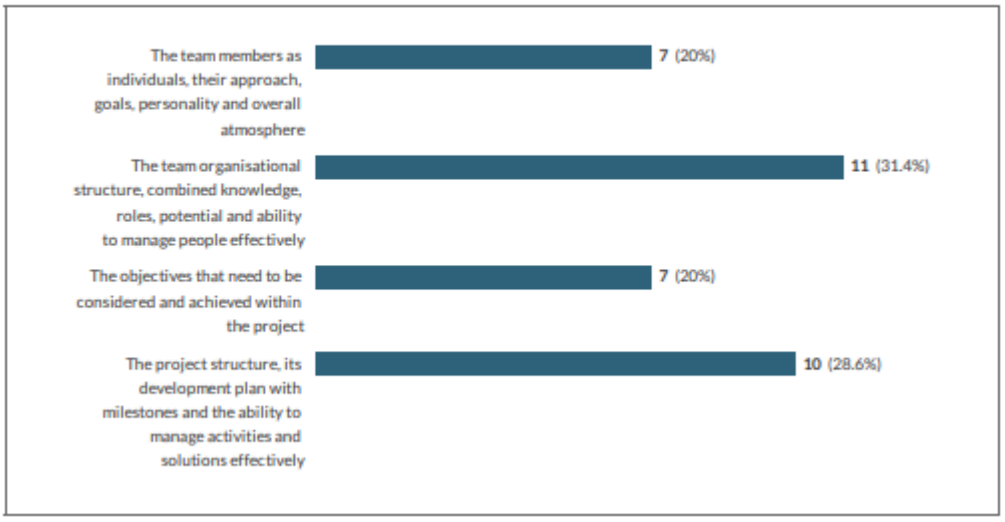
13 In which element defining clear and strict rules had a more positive impact?



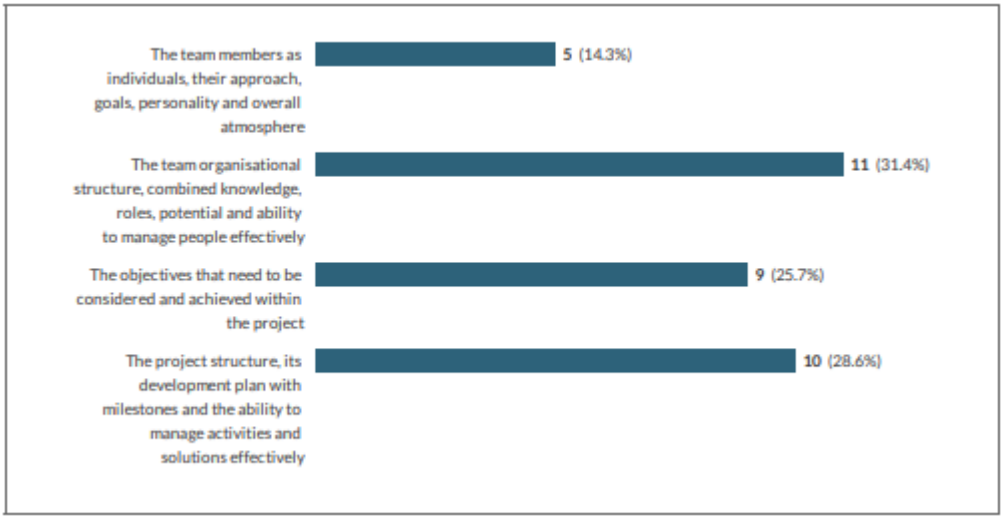
14 In which element the diversity of the team members was most impactful?



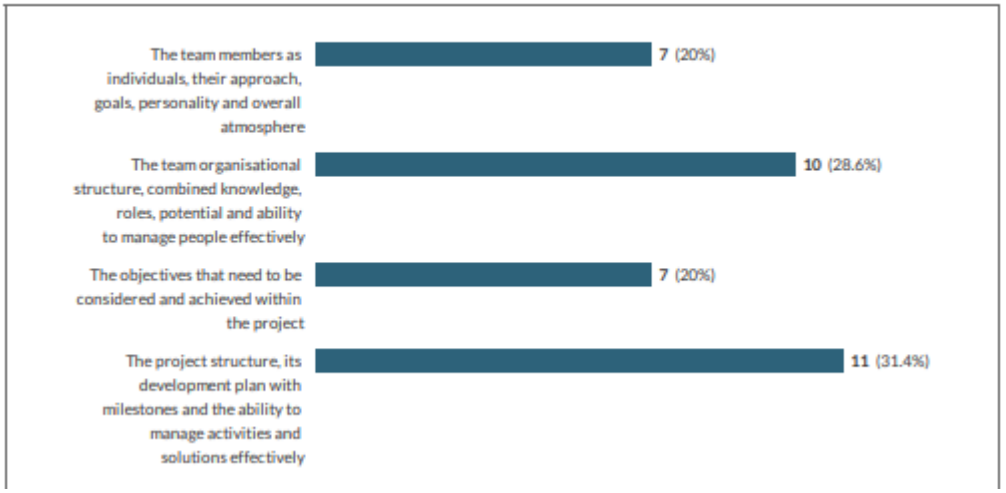
15 What was the key element that helped you grow as an individual and professional?



16 What was the key element that made the most important impact in getting ready for Y3?



17 Looking back at the project, what are you most proud of?



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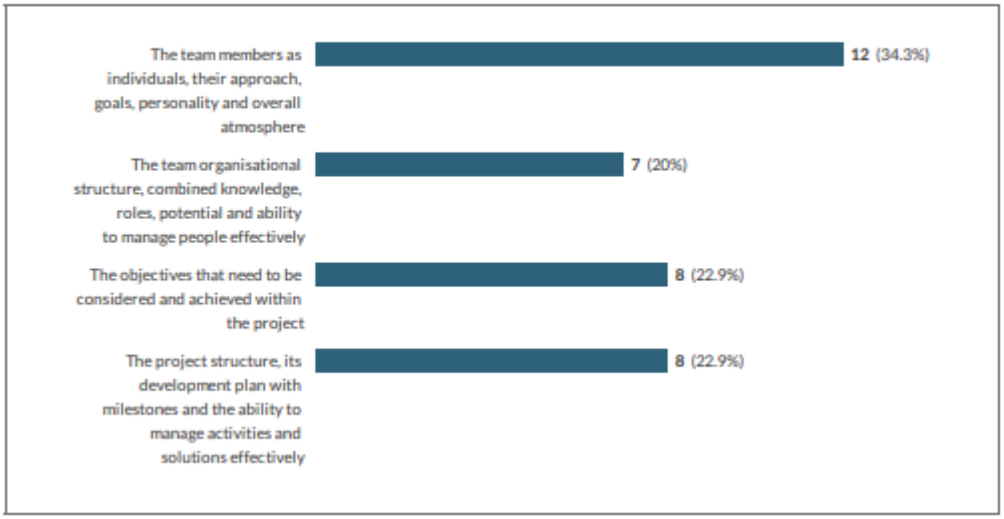
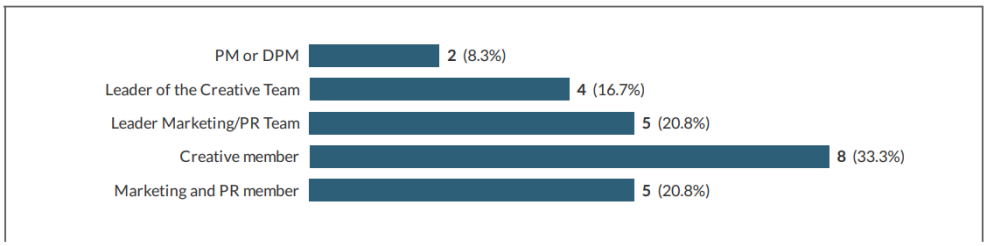


Appendix 5

Survey result cohort 2022

2.b Which one was your role inside the project?



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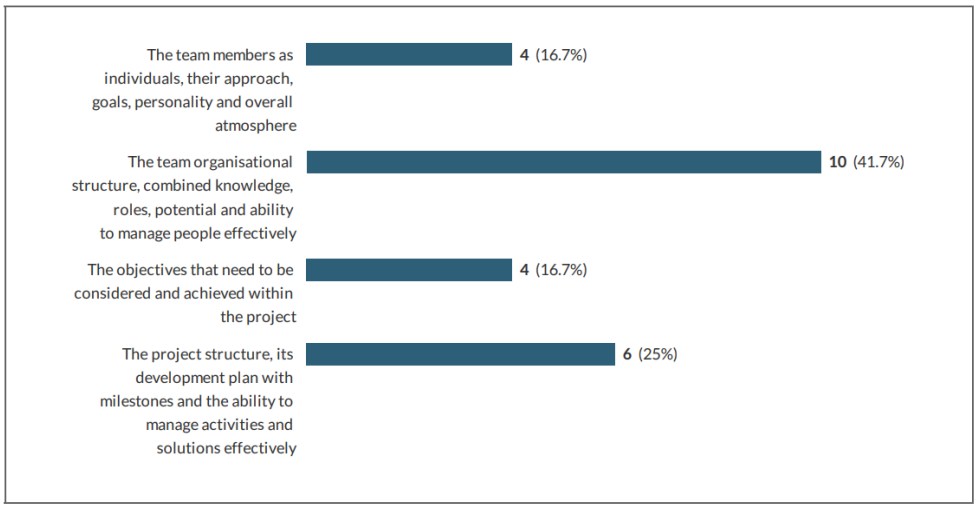

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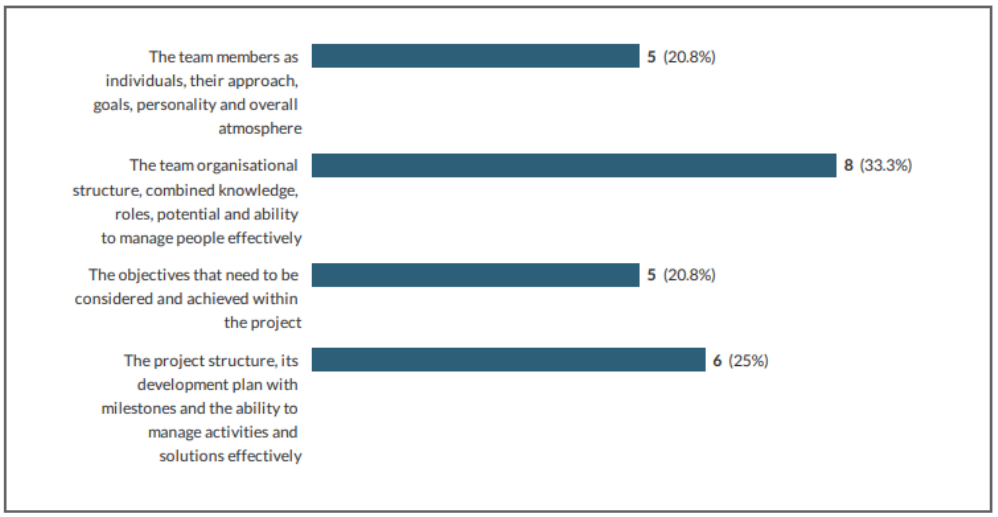

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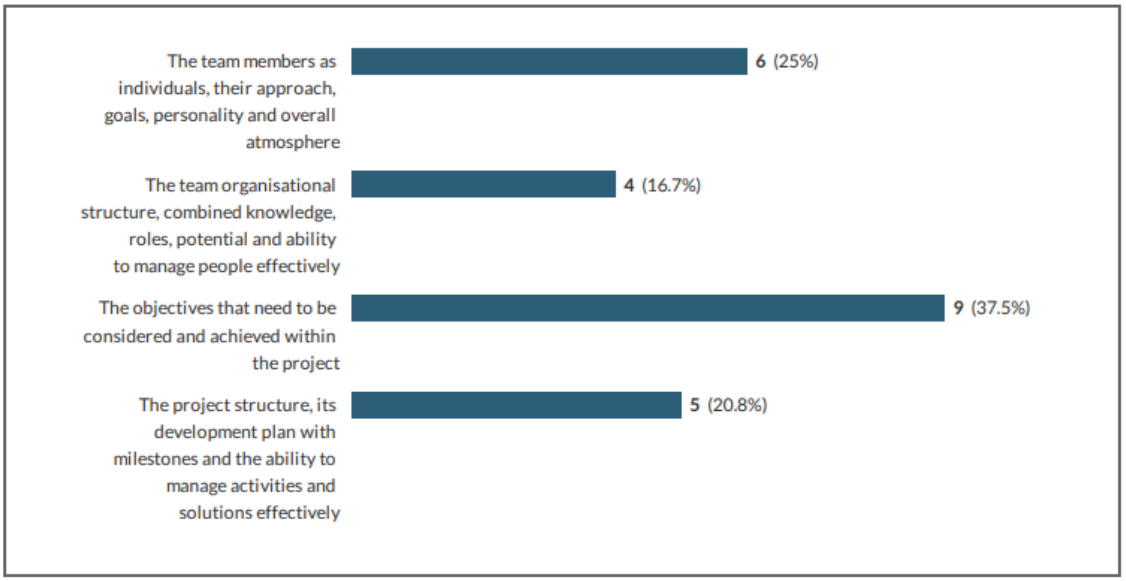

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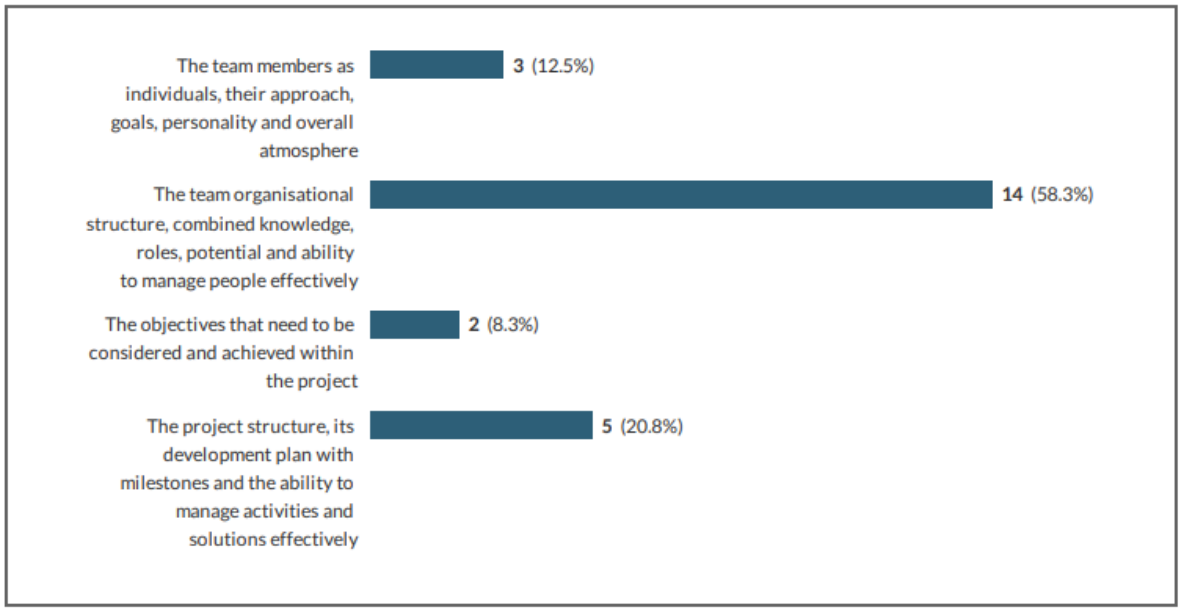

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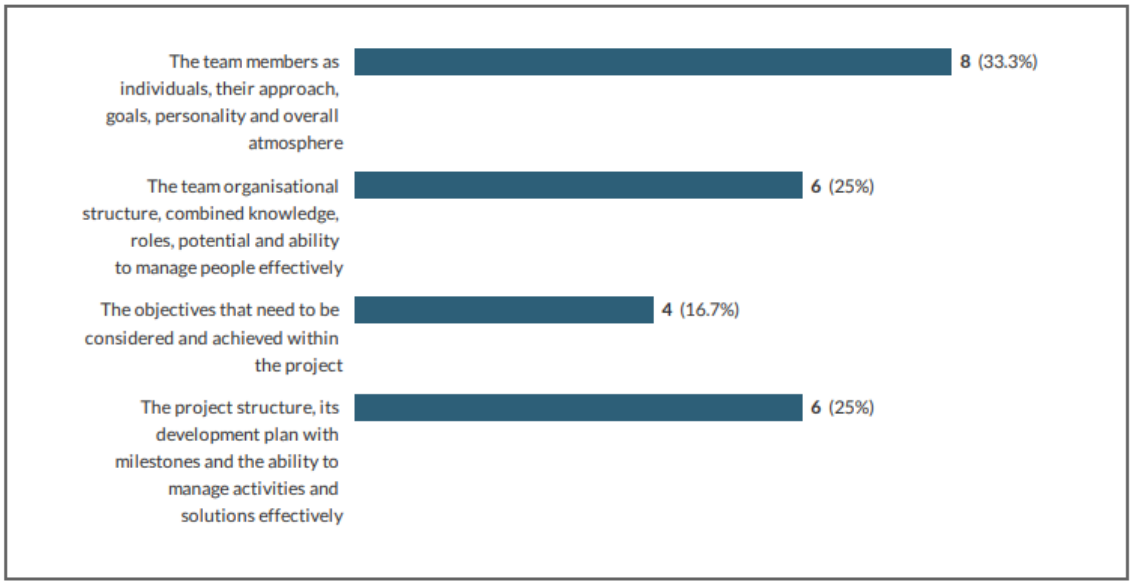

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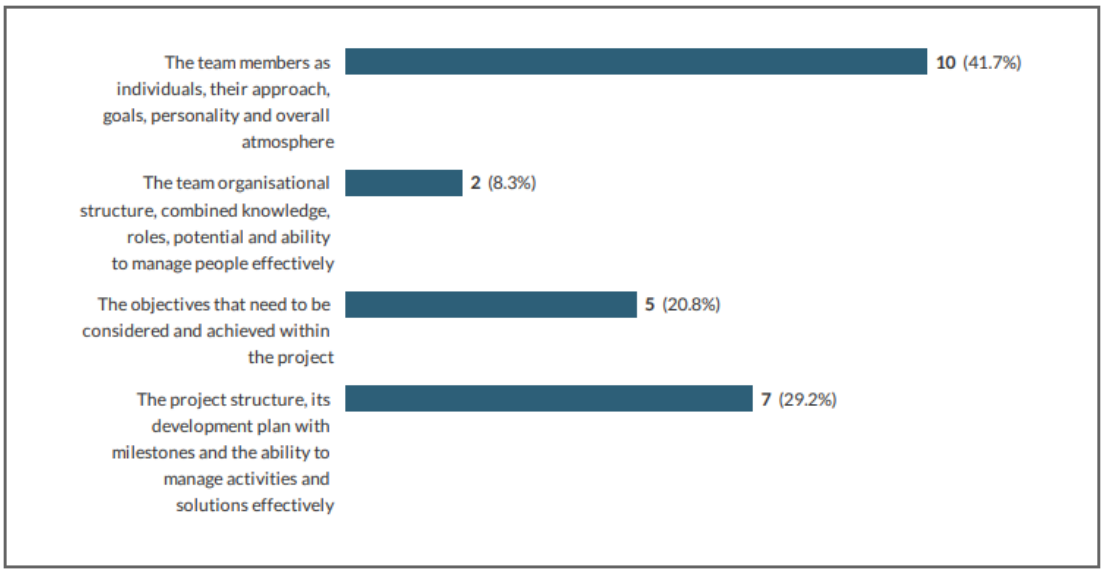

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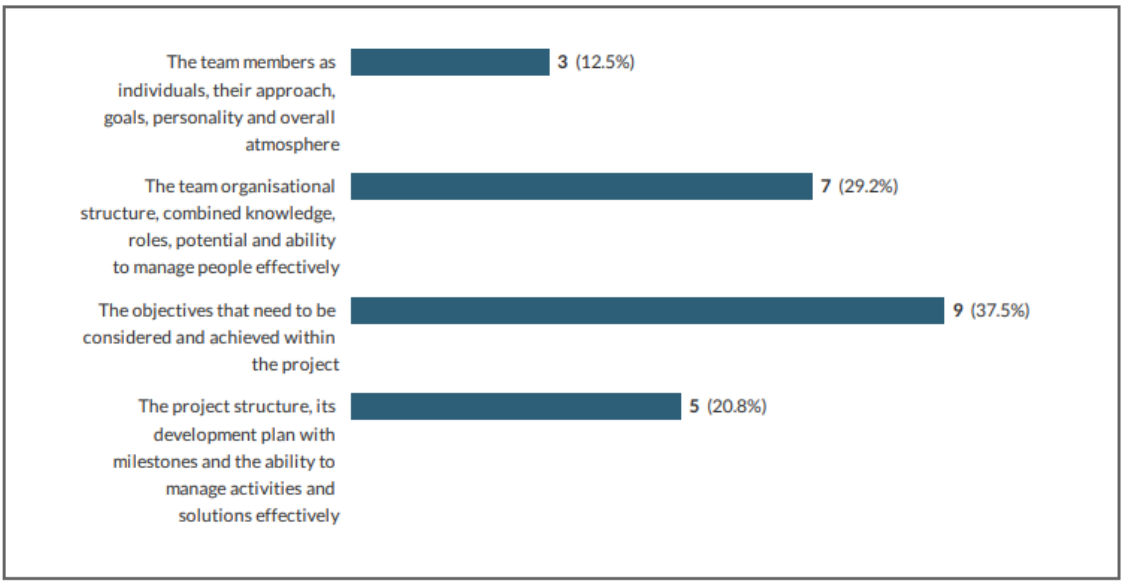

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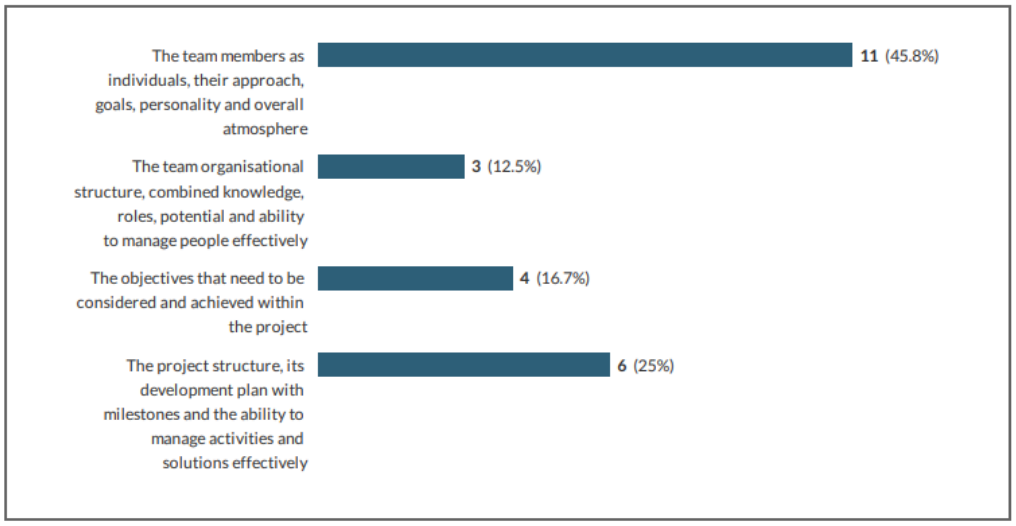

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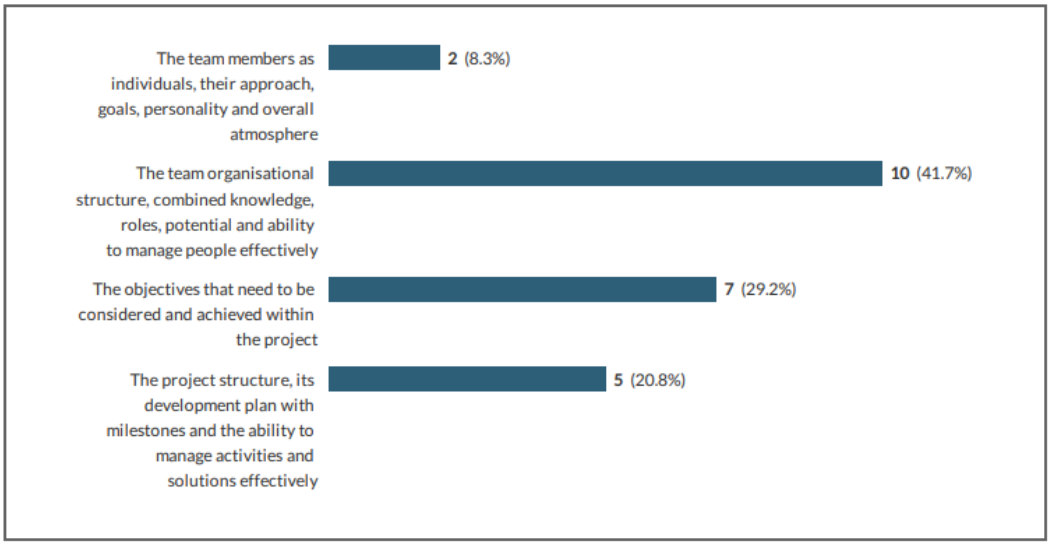

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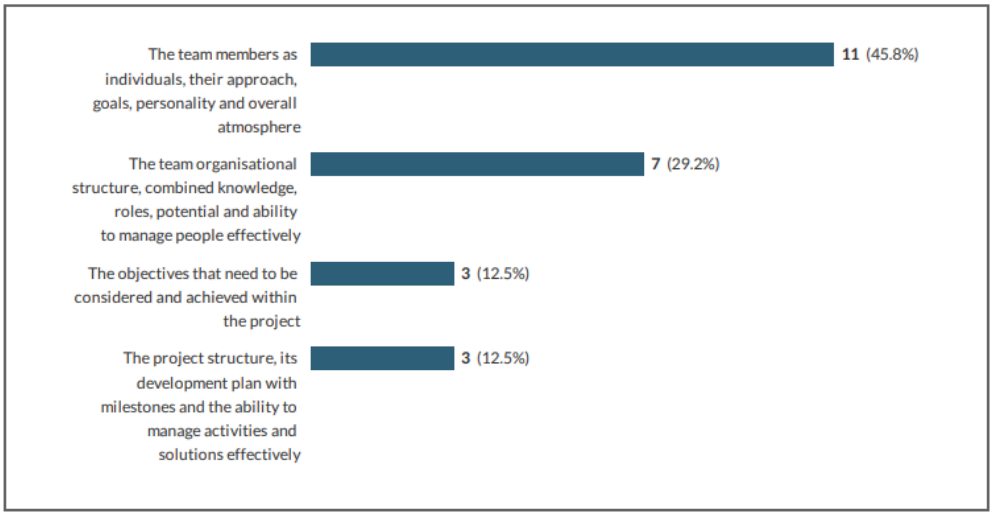

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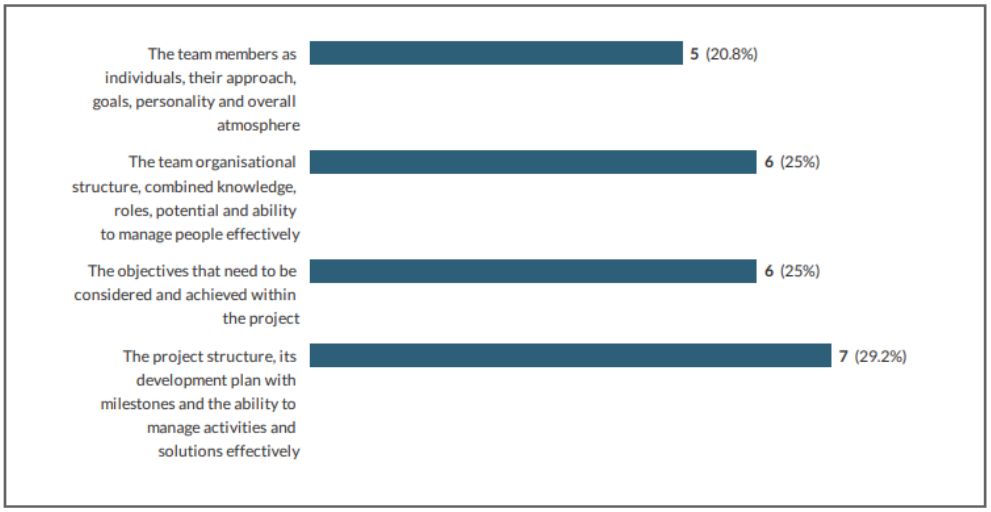

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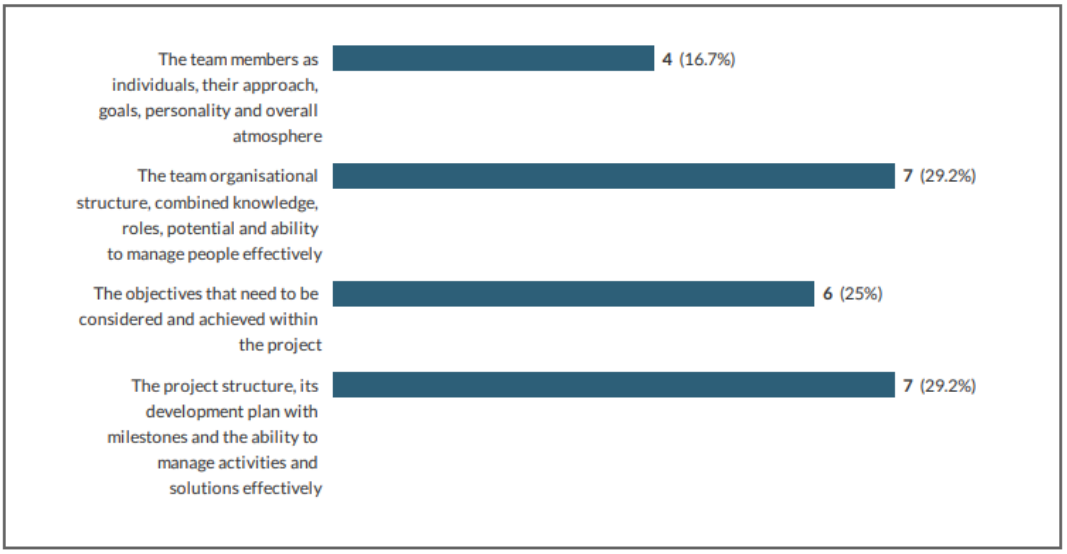
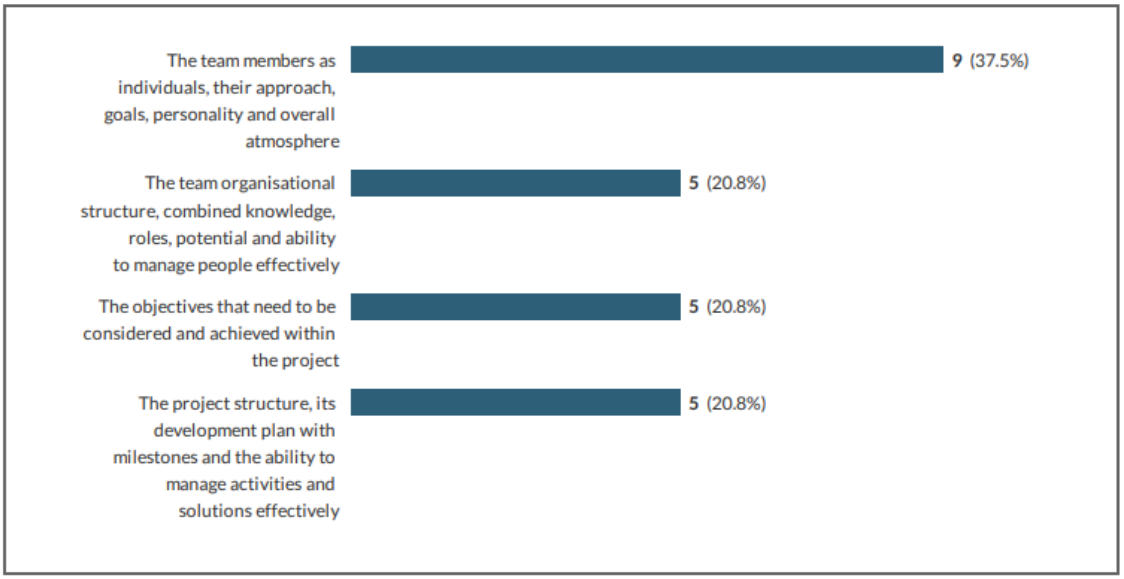
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