A Programme Manager meets the Ghost of Meetings Past, Present and Future.

With Tim Mortimer, an expert in team performance, Penny Pullan reviews the past and present of programme meetings and looks forward to the possibilities for the future in a fun adaptation of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

Martin is standing in the corner of the office after the Christmas Party. He's the last one there; as programme manager, he's played the good host all evening. Now he's feeling shattered and sits down, just for a moment…

Whoa! Where is he? Martin opens his eyes to see a very familiar scene. It's the project room at Saturn Systems. It's been ten years since he left. Hang on – there's his younger self, surrounded by all the project team. It's their final review before 'go live'! The meeting has a real buzz; everyone seems to know each other really well. (It's hardly surprising as they were on site for six months and spent three nights a week at the Duke's Arms over the road.) Martin watches the team carefully and notices that problems seem to have been sorted out *before* the meeting. He'd forgotten just what a stable team he had then and how strong the relationships were. The project went on to deliver pretty much on time and budget. Martin remembers the feeling that he had back at Saturn: he had a grip on the situation and a clear, ongoing overview of the project – as well as more hair! Those were the days.

All of a sudden, the project meeting at Saturn Systems fades into mist and is gone. 'What's going to happen next?' wonders Martin. The fog clears to reveal a less happy scene. Martin sees himself at last week's Programme Review Meeting, alone, on the phone, propped up against his desk at 10:30pm. He's fighting sleep after a long day in airports and aeroplanes. It's another of those infernal telephone conferences, with ten sites across the five countries where his programme team are based. With travel budgets cut to the bone, there's no way that he could justify a face-to-face meeting just for a programme review. It's the turn of the Californians to pick the meeting time. It could be worse. Martin's in the UK. The Russians are being really quiet, probably because it's very early in the morning in Moscow!

Martin ponders on the huge changes over the last ten years of his life: "Nowadays, there are so many people; so many changes in the team: leavers, new joiners. We have huge responsibilities and complexities to deal with. We can't get together in the way we used to, so we lack the strong relationships that helped us deliver at Saturn."

Martin hears a voice on the phone raising another big issue. "Not another potential showstopper? Why do meetings need to be filled with big issues? What happened to people getting things done in between meetings? Why wasn't this issue dealt with weeks ago before it grew to have such impact? Instead, they just swept it under the carpet, despite our new programme reporting system. I suppose it's because we can't see people looking uncomfortable when reporting on their projects. We don't pick up on it and find out what's really going on. Actually, I can hear someone typing in the background. I wonder who is answering their e-mails? Trying to save time by getting two things done at the meeting… it doesn't work as we loose focus. But I've done it too…"

While Martin ponders the rights and wrongs of multi-tasking, the teleconference disappears into hazy mist. But who's that? A dark figure comes towards him and says, "I'm the Ghost of Meetings Past, Present and Future – you've been shown the past and the present. Now you have a choice, it doesn't need to be like this. Do you want to see what the future could be like?" Martin is so surprised that he nods his acceptance. Whoosh… the fog clears to reveal a meeting room. The calendar says 'December 2008'. Martin's UK team is in the room.

Martin can see his future self up front, with the air of someone who once more has a grip on the situation. He's amazed to hear himself adapting when he speaks to each different person: giving the big picture to one, a clear deadline to another and a detailed explanation to a third.

The core of the meeting is a 60 minute telephone conference, with offices around the world connected by speaker phone. Each office has a poster on display showing what they have agreed to achieve during their hour together. The conference flows easily, with a defined structure, which gives time to brainstorm their priorities for 2009. It finishes five minutes early and then the scene disappears again into fog.

Martin and his ghostly companion are alone again. Martin asks the Ghost: "What made this change happen?" The Ghost replies: "You made the time to get everyone together face to face early in 2008 to focus on your team performance. You learned about how to relate to each other in different ways, which are honed for each person. This makes the team effective. You learned the language to be able to talk about differences in a positive way. You focused on meetings and how to make them really productive for all of you, even those telephone conferences. But this is just a possibility – would you like me to show you the nightmare alternative?" "No thanks," says Martin, but the Ghost has already disappeared.

Martin is back, sitting in his office chair, surrounded by party decorations. He opens up his planner to January 1st and writes down, 'Invite team performance specialists to come to our face-to-face meeting in January' and he walks out of the office.

Like Martin, you have a choice. What action will *you* take to build relationships in your team and improve the quality of your programme meetings?

Please e-mail penny@makingprojectswork.co.uk with the subject: **'Team Performance'** and we'll send you Tim's tool for checking the performance of your team. For a free report on "12 ½ ways to make your meetings work for you", please sign up at the new, full Making Projects Work website www.makingprojectswork.co.uk. In addition, we'll send you details of our upcoming seminar series on "Making Telephone Conferences Work".

Penny Pullan is a professional facilitator and programme manager, whose company is focused on making programme and project workshops work. Tim Mortimer specializes in building team performance and coaching executives to achieve their potential.

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