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Managing Projects in a Crisis: Every project manager can learn something from emergency situations

By *Chris Cattaway*

I have seen firsthand the havoc nature inflicts on the world's most vulnerable people. Having managed the responses to devastating earthquakes and cyclones, I know that project managers have a key role to play in helping those worst affected by disaster. I think the lessons learned from these extreme situations are valuable for anyone involved in managing projects.

I cut my humanitarian teeth in Rwanda's Refugee Camps with Medecins Sans Frontieres. In 2001 I was responsible for Save the Children's response to the Indian earthquake in Gujarat , co-ordinating the effort to build 27,000 temporary homes in under six months. In 2003 I established Save the Children's emergency programme following the earthquake which killed 50,000 people in the ancient city of Bam, Iran. Then in 2008 I headed-up Save the Children's response to Cyclone Nargis, in Myanmar, Burma, which was one of the largest emergency programmes ever mounted by a single agency.

The cyclone severely affected 2.4 million people. 95% of housing was destroyed in a huge area and the immediate relief effort will be followed by many years rebuilding the country's devastated infrastructure.

In Burma the relief team grew from 500 people to 1300 people in a few weeks – some of whom had never worked before *at all*. They have a lot to deal with but even experienced managers who have different backgrounds will have their own way of doing things. In an emergency everyone has to learn to work together quickly. However, with no common project management vocabulary or methodology being used in the NGO sector, it's like everyone is living on their own little island. If we are to get people working together more effectively and more efficiently they need to be taken to the 'mainland' where they can share a common language, learn from each other, work with, and understand, some underlying principles so that they can access resources available to the mainstream project management profession.

People often tend to think of project management as being about managing the delivery of products using familiar and pre-tested structured methodologies and processes in a controlled environment. Emergency situations are very uncontrolled environments, teams are brought together at a moment's notice, and yet you need to get things done quickly while chaos reigns supreme. In these situations, you realise that competent project managers can be useful even if they don't use the most sophisticated project

management methodologies. An understanding of project management principles is useful in itself. In fact, practical application of the basic knowledge can be of more benefit than trying to use a very rigorous framework within a culture and environment which is currently at a low level of project management maturity.

Development agencies achieve a huge amount without utilising conventional project management methods with the same rigour as in other sectors. As with other sectors, the relief and development sector has its own unique requirements, and uses lots of other tools and methods that are not commonly used in other sectors. That's not to say that we can't improve by learning from, and adopting, best practice from other sectors, but we know from first hand experience that it is critical to contextualise the materials, and to create a learning environment where practitioners can relate the generic tools to their own jobs, experiences and culture.

At a first glance, it may be easy to overlook the differences between NGOs and private sector organisations, but they are driven by very different values which makes a big difference in terms of the outlook of the people involved, the success factors, and the approaches toward implementation which are acceptable. Nevertheless, I think the private sector and NGOs have more in common than you might think. Both types of organisation want to work as efficiently as they can with the resources they've got. Both want to please their customers. And most people want to do a good job no matter what kind of organisation they work for. Organisations in the public and private sectors could learn a lot from NGO's ability to cope with crisis situations.

Learning from each other is - naturally - a two way street

Other sectors can also teach NGOs a lot. Currently, there's a huge amount of work going on to professionalise the NGO sector, including the development of career pathways, competency frameworks and creating professional associations which will include centres of excellence to recognise and promote best practice in various technical and management disciplines. Much of this is already well-established in other sectors.

Part of this work is the introduction of a new professional qualification for project managers working in development agencies.

The development of the PMDPro (Project Management for Development Professionals) Qualification will be of huge benefit for NGOs and other development organisations. We are working in partnership with The APM Group, LINGOs* and PM4NGOs (Project Management for Non Governmental Organisations) to create a new certification scheme which will enable people to be recruited, and their performance managed against a clear benchmark. Sharing a common vocabulary and understanding should make it easier to work together quickly and efficiently – all of which means being able to be more accountable to the beneficiaries.

The scheme is designed specifically for those working in charities, humanitarian agencies and not for profit organisations. It comprises three levels, and includes both newly-developed contextualised modules and industry-recognised certifications. Pilots are taking place in March and April 2010 and the full scheme is expected to be released later in 2010.

The aim is to make the qualification easy to access and affordable for those working in remote locations, particularly in developing and the least developed countries. In time, this will make a huge difference when teams who have the best intentions but little experience of working together, join forces to help those in the most need.

For further information on the new qualification visit www.apmgroup.co.uk and click PMD Pro.

For further information on PM4NGOs visit www.pm4ngos.org or join the pm4ngos group at www.Linkedin.com

About the Author



Chris Cattaway

Author



As an employee and as a consultant in both the commercial sector and the development/humanitarian (non-profit) sector, Chris's 20+ year career has ranged from designing multi-million dollar telecommunications systems to managing emergency humanitarian aid programmes in Africa and Asia. He has traveled extensively in the developed and developing world. He twice journeyed overland from London to Cape Town, once driving his own Land Rover, and has visited 27 countries in Africa.

Graduating with a degree in Biomedical Electronics, Chris's career started as a Design Engineer and Project Manager in the international telecommunications industry, working on some of the first fibre-optic telecommunications networks projects.

Chris started his humanitarian work with Medecins Sans Frontieres in the refugee camps in, what was then, Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) following the genocide in Rwanda. He worked in Taliban-controlled Southern Afghanistan. He was Oxfam's Country Representative in Burundi during a particularly insecure period in that country's civil war, and set-up therapeutic feeding programmes in Ethiopia. In 2001 he was responsible for Save the Children's response to the earthquake in Gujarat, India. He established, Save the Children's emergency programme following the earthquake Bam, Iran. In 2008 he headed-up Save the Children's emergency response to Cyclone Nargis.

He has held the PMP certification since 1997, and, in 2003, completed a full-time MBA at the University of Otago in New Zealand. His first employment after finishing his MBA was in The Philippines, as a consultant, assisting a multi-national manufacturer of Ethernet-based networking equipment to adjust its organizational culture, and to set-up processes to sell leading-edge triple-play network solutions throughout the Asia Pacific region.

Currently, as an independent consultant based in London, Chris works internationally in the NGO and private sectors. He has taught Project Management for NGOs to Masters students at The Roehampton University. He is currently managing the setting-up of a Consortium of 15 major British Humanitarian Agencies which, with funding from the British government's Department for International Development, will revolutionize the funding of disaster responses and associated capacity building. In recent years he has managed a global capacity building programme for a major international NGO and advised its directors on projectising the implementation of the organisation's strategic objectives.

As a founder member and Principal Advisor to Project Management for NGOs, he is heavily involved in setting up this new global initiative which will increase the project management capacity in international development agencies worldwide , and, with support from the APM Group has established the first internationally-recognised professional certification scheme for NGO Project Managers. Part of this work involves teaching a project management course, contextualised for the development sector, to project managers from developing countries, both face to face and in a virtual (live online) classroom. In the past 3 months, Chris has delivered the course in The Philippines, Qatar and Afghanistan.

In addition to Project Management training, Chris facilitates Leadership training, and workshops which help individuals, teams and organisations in all sectors to work more effectively together. Chris passionately believes that sharing skills and knowledge between different sectors is invaluable, and he takes pride in being able to work equally confidently and competently in both the private sector and the development sector. He can be contacted via www.pm4ngos.org.