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Infrastructure Project Management;
what can we learn from Chinese???

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Benchmarking successful, domestic or foreign, working procedures, business operations, technologies, administrative workflows, and governance structures is becoming the late trend in most developing countries. This could be attributed to lack of financial capacity, skilled manpower, transparent working procedures, committed government, inter-sectoral integration, technology, developed corporate behavior, and creativity. Despite there exists remarkable difference between the public and private sector; the problem is cross-sectoral in prevalence. In a way out, benchmarking is being taken as both a short-cut, and cost effective way of staying competitive in a rapidly changing business environ.

As being the vibrant sector in china's economic development, the Chinese infrastructure sector could teach us a lot of lessons that are missing in most of the developing countries, including Ethiopia. Here is a shortlist, which should not be taken as comprehensive by any means, of lessons that policy makers, policy planners, project planners, project mangers, programme managers, decision makers and politicians could learn from the Chinese infrastructure sector, on which a seminar, that I take part, in title Regional Macro-economic Modeling and Infrastructure Development of Developing Countries, was held from 5th–25th of April 2007. If you want to forward anymore, you are dearly welcome on the PM Forum platform. I can be reached for comment on getdem2006@yahoo.com, or getupfront@gmail.com

Infrastructure development is the engine of economic growth whereby the well being of the people of a country could be ensured through enhancing education, health, food security, social harmony, democracy, natural resource management, cultural integration, psychological stability, and religious concord. It seems that Chinese have understood this well since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Since then, the Chinese infrastructure sector has leaped forward in metallurgy, electricity, automobile, machinery, irrigation, transport and communication, water supply and sanitation, railway, airports, manufacturing, hi-tech, industrial-clusters, nature conservation, agriculture and many more sectors, to the extent that the country becomes the 4th strongest economy in the world. This influence of the Chinese infrastructure sector has stretched far, beyond domestic needs, to reach to the dire needs of other developing countries, mainly Africa, though other political and economic reasons are the leading factors.



(Photo: -Sichuan Ertan Water Power Station)

What lessons can we (especially, project managers) learn from the Chinese infrastructure sector?

1. Finish Before You Start

Planning is the key to the development of Chinese infrastructure. They do invest much resource to planning the way things should look like. This process group, the planning process group, also lies at the heart of the project management process group. At project level, this process comprises, in general terms, of initiating the planning process itself, defining what to do, thorough drawing of the works to be done, and controlling the planning process itself. With this regard, even in 1950s where the Chinese economy was at frail, and financial sponsors to major infrastructure projects were scarce, PRC was undertaking the execution of 156 capital projects (mainly of infrastructure) employing stringent planning, and thoughtful resource allocation. Within all the power, military, machinery, automobile, oil-field development, and railway projects that were being undertaken at this time, Chinese were trying to rely mainly on domestic capital, clear role and responsibility relegation, distinct accountability, effective central-district level communication, semi-cultural risk analysis and minimization methodologies, and locally developed quality metrics.

This could teach us that planning is the key to project success, and hence every possible resource should be devoted to it. As it is in planning where project scope statement, work breakdown structure, network diagram, resource plan, project schedule, quality specifications, communication plan, risk response plan, procurement plan, and process improvement plan (which all are actually fundamental to project management) will be prepared, sufficient amount of all types of resources should be allocated to it. Nevertheless, due to the ever-changing customer demands, and fast moving business environment, the planning process is being compressed, and even sometimes overlooked by companies (either private or public). Cognizant of the fact that time spent on effective and efficient planning is worth successful implementation, companies shall pay due accord to the process and its requirements. In so doing, local availability of resources and indigenous ways of solving problems shall be given attention.

2. Maintaining Efficient Horizontal and Vertical Integration

China is a country with a land area of 960,000 square kilometers, which, according to the 1995 census, have 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities with a population number of more than 1,211 million. In such a large country where administrative responsibilities are decentralized to provincial, municipal, and district units, maintaining an effective and efficient integration between the central and local infrastructure-related units is definitely a challenging task. No doubt, it was. But, with domestically stemmed structural arrangement, institutional setting, and political will, the Chinese have made it possible. Aside the vertical integration

(an integration of efforts of provincial units to central government units), the Chinese have been able to maintain strong horizontal relationship (province to province affiliation). This strong integration has made the Daqing oilfield, the Panzhihua iron and steel industrial base, the Wuhan rolling mill, the Liujia gorge hydropower station, the Hubei automotive work, the Lanzhou-Urumiqi railway, the Chandu-Kuming railway, the Pingshuo open cult coal mine, and many other projects ground truths.

From a project management point of view, integration has due value. Establishing and maintaining effective integration is one of the challenging tasks of a project manager. It requires creating a compromising solution for sometimes conflicting needs of project stakeholders. Integration management, one of the knowledge areas of project management, involves creating suitable methodologies, tools, and techniques to ensure the integration of all project stakeholders including departments, work groups, project teams, companies, project sponsors, government institutions, team leaders, customers and what have you, towards the successful delivery of the project product.

The Chinese have applied transparency, commitment and distinct power delegation, aside from other technicalities, to achieve the most fascinating projects of all times. We (especially, project managers) shall ask ourselves, at all points in the project, on how to proactively manage the integration of our project for timely, cost-effective and quality delivery of our project product. Yet, neither of the two sides, horizontal and vertical integration, shall be ignored. A balanced integration is a base for coordinated project success. Who will hate that, then!

3. Team Work

Humans are the ones who will transform a plan to tangible outcomes. They are actually the ones who would plan, execute, and control all project activities. As individualism is far contradictory to project works, understanding the targets of the project, and combining efforts towards their successful accomplishment is mandatory. But it is not easy to achieve it, as to plan about it.

The socio-cultural realm of Chinese people has accustomed them to teamwork, and broader vision. Furthermore, the political system (a multi-party system under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party) has also taught them on how to unite themselves towards national prosperity. The religious side of the people has also strengthened the above facts. With this all in place, in addition to customized project team management and conflict resolution methods, who will question Chinese about working together towards a given goal...as to me, no one.

This would leave us (especially, project managers) a lesson on the fact that: we shall accord due concern to the political, social, cultural, and religious sides of project staffs, and be flexible enough in treating them accordingly.

4. Celebration

Do you believe that you and your team have to celebrate after the successful delivery of a project product? I hope you do as Chinese do.

Celebration after successful delivery of a product or after the successful achievement of an important milestone is one way to get the wheel turning, and make the project a life time memory. It is also a way to maintain team spirit, and appreciate outstanding personnel.

The Chinese people do have a trend of family, village, provincial, or national level celebrations attributed to different socio-cultural reasons. Their colorful celebrations are really attractive to anyone.



In project celebration, like the Chinese celebration, it is better to keep the team mood. Parallel recognitions shall also be team wise at any time possible. But this does not mean that we shall ignore outstanding staffs.

I will be back with the final four lessons, and a final summary by the next month edition. Wish you a Good PM Month!!!

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