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

Part 2

By Getachew Teklemariam Alemu

I hope May was a marvelous PM month for all of you, as I have wished for it to be in my last month's viewpoint article. Here in PM Forum, there is a real respect to promises. Being part of it, I am also indebted to keep my promises. So, here I come.

Last month I tried to put four lessons that we, project professionals, especially project managers, could learn from the Chinese infrastructure sector. Strong emphasis on planning ahead of project works, maintaining effective horizontal and vertical integration, avoiding individualistic approaches and focusing on team work, and celebrating the success of the project together were my points.

Despite the lessons that we can learn from the world-leading infrastructure sector could be as wide ranging as our observations, I will add four more points that I think are, mostly, being given less recognition. Meanwhile, don't forget to add on the list, comment on my points, or share your own perspectives on our sailing boat-pmworldtoday. Contacting me is also as easy as to drop a line to getdem2006@yahoo.com or getupfront@gmail.com.

5. Authority

Authority is a well talked about title in project management. Project managers will not stop to seek more of it. It is common for a project manager to have a responsibility to do the job right, but not the authority over the essential elements necessary to get the job done. A project may require one or all of human, material, financial, legal, or institutional resources. However, getting them in place at the right time, at the right place and with justifiable cost requires some kind of authority. In project context, the project manager is the one who would be responsible for overseeing the proper placement of these ingredients. Yet, the one who do have the authority, in most cases, would be another body. To worsen it, this body (individual) may not understand the strict scope, cost, time and quality constraints that the project manager is struggling with. Had authority been properly coupled with responsibility, the project manager would have spent the time that he spent on negotiating with the placement of the resources on essential project works.

This issue is less worrying to project managers in Chinese infrastructure sector. Provided that there is a national development plan, which is at its eleventh phase now, everybody has got a road map at his hand to look at where the country is heading. This has created a consensus on where to go, at what time to go, and at what speed to go. This will relieve the project manager's fret on contractual settings. It will enhance mutual understanding, especially in turnkey types of projects.

In addition to this, the type of decentralization in china has provided due importance to coupling responsibility with authority. This authority is a well-communicated one to the extent that every stakeholder in the sector would know the project manager, what he is responsible for, what his requirements may be, at what time/speed he desires to have it, and, most of all, what the contribution of the project is towards national prosperity.

Thus which project manager would hate to work in a situation where a proper balance between responsibility and authority is maintained? My gut tells me...NO One.

6. Participation

Participation is a way to; ensure ownership, enhance representativeness, entertain varying perspectives, facilitate integration, incubate innovation and achieve overall project success. Every project plan will have distinct regulations on participation (in both qualitative and quantitative views), though the level, type and objective of stakeholder participation could vary among projects. Cognizant of the fact that the project manager is the one to have both a leading and managing role in the project, he shall have clear idea on whom to inform, consult, delegate, control and partner with. *(Pictured below - the fourth ring road in Beijing).*



Naturally, infrastructure projects have many stakeholders, who do, in most cases, have conflicting interest. The federal government may focus on employment creation, the local government on technological prestige, the design company on technical feasibility, the local community on environmental protection, and so on. Unless all of the stakeholders take part in decision-making, some perspectives will be overlooked to result in a snag in project implementation. Hence ensuring proper participation shall be a concern to the project manager.

The Chinese do have fantastic local participatory frameworks for decision-making. The concept starts from the higher governmental body, the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Party, which deliberate and approve macro level economic stuffs and huge-investment (cross-provincial) infrastructure projects. The trend goes down to each individual project level where stakeholders will deliberate and approve a decision to be made at project level. After all, it is for a harmonious national prosperity (as they always say it).

This point will remind us (especially project managers) that we have to design a comprehensive participation matrix, and implement it wisely. After all, it is for an overall success of our project. Isn't it?

7. Institutional Setting

A billion dollars, well trained professionals, stringent standards, and available inputs mean nothing if an effective institutional setting is not there to help combine them fashionably, and result in the intended outcome. The institutional settings of the big picture, which projects are part, do have an influence on projects. The system, style, norm, and structure of the institution will stretch its hands towards the way projects would be managed. Risk-taking, innovative, flexible and project-oriented institutional setting will facilitate project success as compared to risk-phobic, inflexible, hierarchical, and operation-oriented institution. In part, the project manager could influence it; but most of it is out of his jurisdiction. Thus, it would, in some ways, be a matter of chance to work in favorable setting.

This will not be a headache to you if you are in china. Provided that the economy is at its raising stage, flexible, entrepreneurial, innovative, and project-oriented institutional settings are becoming popular. What a treasure for project managers!

4. Alternatives

That is what impresses me most. China is a land of abundance (Don't ask me the source?). As a project manager, we have, always, to be able to make a sound compromise between different combinations of technology, Labour, capital, land, market, and so on besides the tetrad constraints of scope, time, cost and quality. In doing so, *availability* matters. But if you are in china, throw the *availability* dimension away, and puzzle your head only towards having a feasible combination. Isn't it impressive to have a bundle of alternatives at one place? Yes, it is.

Before I finish, I want to underline that learning has to be our daily matter in a project. As day two will come up with its own challenges (unique in their own ways), we have to prepare ourselves for it by learning from what we

have been through in day one. Looking at the experience of others could also be worthwhile, as we cannot be perfect by all measures. After all, isn't life about learning? I believe so. *This aspect has to be given special concern in developing countries, including Ethiopia, since we are developing as our name indicates.*

About the Author:



Getachew Teklemariam Alemu

International Correspondent

Author



Getachew Teklemariam Alemu is an International Correspondent for PMForum and *PM World Today* based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Mr. Alemu is also an Infrastructure Projects Expert in the Development Projects Department of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, government of Ethiopia. Getachew is responsible for monitoring, appraising and reporting on public sector infrastructure projects financed by the Ethiopian government and bilateral/multilateral donor agencies. He has a Bachelor's of Science degree in Land Resources Management and Environmental Protection from Mekelle University in Ethiopia. More information about Getachew Teklemariam can be found at <http://www.pmforum.org/pm%20forum%20team/index.htm#5>. Getachew can be contacted at getdem2006@yahoo.com.