

Project Management and its Barriers: A Case Study ¹

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Abstract

Working in an environment like Australia is not easy, the country carries with its diversity and unique styles of working. My first construction project in Australia was with one of the biggest Australian Departments. The project consisted of a 4-story building in the city that the department wanted to renovate to use it as conciliation rooms, multipurpose rooms and open space offices.

During the project, we faced disputes in communication, cultural differences, variations in approach to work, and weak coordination. In this reflective essay, we will discuss the approach that was taken during the construction project and its different phases. We will include our organisational structure, and elaborate on the barriers that we faced until we reached completion and handover.

We were engaged during the construction phase and starting this time we had to follow our normal project life cycle which is Initiation, planning, executing, monitoring, controlling and handing-over. We established extra team building activities, training, and supportive environment to overcome the above barriers and put us on track to the Australian construction system.

Keywords: Construction, Project Management, Barriers

Introduction

The success of the project is defined by how well the project manager can deliver the project on time, within budget and with the best quality; i.e. the project performance. According to PMI: "Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements." (PMI, 2017).

Most of the transformational projects are chaotic and hard to adapt to the transformation that is being made. The project brief was simple, refurbish and relocate members from their former location to their newly refurbished site, both located in the heart of the city and intersecting each other. We are moving the members and staff from normal underground offices to a more technology-based and widespread office that requires different security system and different handling. The relocation would occur to two different type of sectors, one sector would relocate to level 16 and the other to level 17. It was easy until we started facing some barriers on the project between ourselves as a management team and the stakeholders who refused to move to level 17.

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To overcome the barriers that will be discussed in this essay, we had to implement a new project planning process that included a more based project management plan and different communication strategy and an innovative stakeholder management plan. This assisted in facilitating the communication channels, accepting the environmental factors, discussing in-depth risks of the project and implementing a change control process.

Linking barriers to the project

We consider this project as our baby, it is our first project and we gained from its experience on a different managerial level. The project was completed over a span of 6 months, during which we faced some barriers on two levels:

Organisational level

Communication – since I had started fresh and it is my first project, I had difficulty realizing the importance of communication-based on a contract. I came from a totally different background and I had a different way of dealing with issues. Hence, clarity was the key in the communication between my project manager and me to lead this project to success. The diversity that Australia holds, leads to multiple organisational culture barriers such as differences in ethics, manners, backgrounds, opinions, and ambitions. Sometimes these barriers form strength to the company, while in other cases, like ours it created some complications; however, we managed to redirect our weaknesses into a strength by conducting team building activities and sharing experience workshops. Our organisational structure consisted of a standard structure where one project manager is responsible for one project and has under his command a contract administrator and an assistant. Once a barrier is set between two people it will tackle the team as a whole and initiate anxiety towards the project that will, later on, appear to the client and be set as a weakness towards the organisation.

Project level

The communication on various project levels differs since it involves different stakeholders, client, contractor, sub-contractors and other relevant members. The weak design would lead to an incomplete project, and this is exactly what happened with us. During this project, the mechanical designer wasn't attending meetings and cooperating and we had to replace him without finishing the proper design documents. The design issues led to multiple requests for information from the contractor that had to be addressed as quickly as possible; hence, we have allowed for a different type of communication on the project. Normally, the contractor should convey to us the problem and we circulate with other design consultants; however, on this job, we had to allow for design consultant-contractor communication plan to steer this project to success.

On the other hand, we had another communication issue with one of the stakeholder members. The staff that were supposed to relocate to level 17 were not included in any of the designing meetings and what they would like to have in their new facility was not taken into consideration. Their team leader didn't explain to them the move that is occurring, and hence we couldn't justify the move properly. Consequently, this

led to level 17 members staying unoccupied for nearly 3 months. Apparently, this department had undergone a lot of changes in the past 2 years which resulted in this negative attitude which is considered as a barrier.

Tools used to overcome these barriers

At the project level, success means the finished project realized the objectives and sustained them in the organisation after the project has been completed (Pzydek and Keller, 2003). Barriers evidently restrict the project from reaching accomplishment. In the project under study, we have utilized more than one tool to overcome the barriers faced. Knowing that we were engaged after the design phase has been completed; these tools include, but are not limited to strategic thinking, effective communication plan, organisational and culture respect, and new practices. "Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward; they may be beaten, but they may start a winning game." (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

Strategic thinking

The project manager and I had to think of a strategic plan to facilitate the project progress while taking into consideration the diversity of cultures on the job; namely, different nationalities, different genders, different contractors etc. We faced contractor – designer issues and we had to think out of the box to reduce the barrier and make space to cooperative working space. Strategically thinking we need to engage all parties on the same page to make this work, so we planned a workshop whereby we set our client's goals and objectives out of the designed project and worked on pinpointing the issues and methods to solve them. We had to get the input of everyone to make sure that no one is left behind and all skills have been utilized. Albert Einstein said: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Hence we needed a new strategy in place to solve and break the barrier.

As a project management organisation, we set some KPIs for us to make sure that we deliver what is needed. As discussed in our lectures leadership plays a vital role in driving the projects to success; hence, we drew a project development plan at the launching of the project and reviewed it at the end to see what needed enhancement. This is how we created a manner and systematic thinking for the future of our organisation, the project and other people that are engaged on the project. We created a new vision, a different engagement system, and alignment.

Effective communication

Effective communication is one that is based on attentive listening, empathy, uncritical issued by their own judgments and opinions that captures each other's needs, his expectations from you as a dialogue partner. (TOMESCU-DUMITRESCU, C., 2016). At this stage, we had to enhance communication channels, considering the diversity of job responsibilities and expertise and issues on the job. As a project management team, we allowed for cooperation between the design team and the contractor under our supervision to make sure that we administer the contract and secure everyone's rights and ambitions. In general, we had to understand cultural

differences and keep in mind that most people on the job speak a different language than English.

On the client's level, we had to include the team that is rejecting the change in the communication circle. We incorporated on this specific project the change management plan that requires an effective communication method to be successful. Further through the project, we decided to get them on site and make a tour for them to get them to see the better part of the project; i.e. design being converted from paper to reality. It became a more advanced facility and we were able to prepare a prototype room for them that said what couldn't be translated in words, a more advanced facility with wider and more open space.

At the organisational level, the project manager offered me the opportunity to learn and grow. We found a new method to support the learning process; instead of communicating by words we started communicating by actions. I used to finalize all required tasks and the project manager used to track the changes so that I learn. This allowed for flexibility on the job and a common language of communication for describing tasks and roles.

Link between organisational and individual objectives and results

Each organisation has its own vision, mission, goals and objectives that employees should abide by, Christenson and Walker (2004), as well as Shimizu and Hitt (2004), purport that the development and articulation of a project vision are key to successful project outcomes. During the kick off meeting we, as project managers, agreed that all organisational objectives should be met, the contractor should get a fair price to the job they are giving and the client should get a good quality for the cost that they are paying. At the end of the project, everyone's organisational objectives were achieved.

On an individual level, regular meetings were conducted to maintain a high level of learning application which reduced the organisational cultural barriers and reduced communication barriers.

New practices

When an organisation wins a project, they need to prepare a project management plan (PMP). In this particular project, we had a different vision before we stepped in; another tool used was to apply new practices. We had to change our PMP, explicitly, to incorporate different communication channels and allow for more circulation of information, a different manner of addressing request for information and variations on the project, especially that we had fussy stakeholders that kept changing their mind. This PMP included more value for people, skills and expertise used, transparency and clear objectives, rewards and outcomes.

Management of the Project

According to Alavi and Leidner (2001), knowledge management is a complete and organisationally specified process for acquiring, organising, and communicating both tacit and explicit knowledge so that others can use that knowledge to become more

effective and productive. The project was managed following our organisational life cycle which is reflected in our project management plan.

As a team, I was assisting the project manager who was the principal's authorized person and had to deal with all the instructions and communication with all the contractors and consultants. It was my first project, I had a lot to learn and addressing these barriers at the end of the project made it easier for me to learn. I had to grab the explicit and implicit knowledge from our system and from my manager because these will be my basis for the next project. The client continuously changed his mind and we had to adapt with this modification and make it happen. We were restricted on time because it is a high level department we had to make sure that everything is functioning and with the best quality because official meetings couldn't be rescheduled easily and we had to give at least a two weeks' notice to reschedule a meeting. The budget was flexible; which is why we pulled the management team to focus on time and quality.

Approach taken and Lessons Learned

Our organisation has a specific project life cycle that is extracted from PMBOK which includes initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and controlling and handover of the project. We were involved during the construction phase, and we knew that there were dilemmas and barriers between the contractor, consultants and stakeholder. When we got the job, we made the MYERS-BRIGGS type indicator and we were able to study the nature of the people we were dealing with which enhanced and built up a better relationship onsite. At the end of the project, we conducted a project performance evaluation and we workshopped the lessons learned on the project that included:

- A communication plan should be set at the beginning of the project to make sure that all parties are on the same page. "Effective communication skills are indispensable skills for a project manager to possess."
- Administer the contract and conduct an early workshop explaining the type of contract that the works are being conducted under.
- Maintain a change register to control the change resistance from different stakeholders.
- Make room for organisational culture, different people with different backgrounds and different commitments do stuff differently. The desire for organisational improvement.
- Regardless of the type of organisation, a project vision, mission, and requirements analysis should be developed and articulated to increase the likelihood of a successful project outcome.
- Project planning results in a reduction of the number of changes required during the construction phase; hence, this minimizes confusion, barriers and ineffective communication.
- Educate stakeholders on new approaches to reduce their resistance to change

Outcomes of the approach taken in the project

We took different approaches for the proposed barriers and as a whole project, we addressed it in a unique way due to the importance of the client. We had a positive

feedback from the client and we were invited directly after the handover of the project to a tender with the same client representative for another similar refurbishment.

As for the project outcomes, we had some design issues that lead to more work even after handover. The client had to move into the building and utilize the rooms due to previously scheduled meetings. However, some design mistakes had to be re-worked after completion to keep the client satisfied. Moreover, we built a project management matrix that addressed the soft and hard skills. By the end of the project, we have advanced further towards competency.

The outcome of the approach taken by the contractor and consultants regarding communication, organisational respect, clarity, and cooperation to reduce the design barriers were considered successful. Due to the immense cooperation especially in designing the missing pieces of the documents, the client invited the contractor to do a side job even without tendering.

The above confirms that we got positive outcomes with regards to the approaches taken to reduce barriers, increase and distribute knowledge and the theories implemented on the project. It demonstrated a deep knowledge and experience of project management.

Advantages and disadvantages of the approach

Some of the theories are old and were successful in previous years which means they have an expiry date. Other theories were superseded and we can still implement them nowadays and sometimes we make up theories to suit the situation of the project. In the suggested project, we had to merge some theories and tweak them to suit our situation and position in the project and other plans were taken from our company's regular processes and studies.

Our organisation gives diplomas in project management to big companies which are a huge advantage to us on a project. Once we utilize our communication plan, our strategy process, our risk management plan etc. the client is confident that we know what we are using. Another advantage of using tackling the barriers using our methods is to lead the project to success and to build a relationship between all parties on the job. The approaches will allow us to study the EQ and expectations of the parties involved in the construction phase which will also assist in meeting the project's objectives.

Some of the disadvantages of using the approaches would be taking control of the situation using norms and studies which might lead to another barrier between the contractor and us as project managers on the job.

Conclusion

I have used the lectures dealing with barriers, implicit and explicit knowledge and individual theories to explain the success of the project. The above-mentioned lectures played an important role in identifying different sections of the project. The project is considered successful because it was delivered within budget, on time and

with the department's standards and regulations. "Many projects fail because the project manager is unable to effectively manage the sometimes hidden and conflicting agendas of the various project stakeholders" (Bourne & Walker, 2005).

I would use similar approaches on another project and build a similar relationship with all stakeholders, contractors and consultants because everything we had done drove the project to success. I would try to engage more of the company's procedures and plans to keep the good reputation and identity of the company in the market. Advertising and marketing require a lot of money, and this is a method to keep our name visible so that they would invite us to other tenders and remember that we delivered a successful project.

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