

Project Management Challenges in Ghana: The Public Sector Projects in Perspective

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Abstract

Prelude: Anytime I am asked to talk in relation to project, I remember my school days when a lecturer asked the class Quantitative Methods and Analysis class to do an assignment on Project Management. Specifically, Project Management Process. In there somewhere was the phrase 'Dummy period'. You know those periods when concrete have to cure and dry up. Well it so happened according to his assessment that the original work was only two and the rest were copied. Because it cannot be possible that more than half the class got the phrase wrong in the same place. Trust me since that time, he refused to give the class any take home assignment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Not every public sector project impacts society the same way – but each has the potential to improve the lives of citizens and the effectiveness / efficiency of governments. Public sector projects are geared towards creating results for society – managers of such projects therefore do not only carry the burden of ensuring successful completion, but also the consequences of failure to the society and public. It is no doubt that governments are constrained in terms of resources, yet the public sector is held accountable to increase productivity and service delivery in a rapidly changing global environment. Managing projects has always been and will continue to be a daunting task regardless of the scope of work involved, particularly in the face of multiple relevant stakeholders; new or unproven technology; shifting or unclear project required specifications and limited or scarce fund, material and human resources. In the public sector, these factors are more intense, and project success is very imperative to facilitate changes in the public sector and in the lives of citizens.

In the public sector, governments come and go, yet projects must continue. This requires public sector project managers to keep government initiatives and projects on track to help politicians fulfil promises, but more importantly fulfilling such promises for the public good. Varied factors account for the success or failure of public sector projects, so the question we should always be asking is, “What makes public sector projects more difficult to manage?”

Below is a list of factors which by no means is exhaustive:

- i. Management of multiple layers of relevant stakeholders, each with peculiar interests
- ii. Managing an environment of often-conflicting goals and outcomes
- iii. Hi public tolerance of project failures due to impacts on wider society
- iv. Complex measures for performance, goals and project outcomes
- v. Almost nonexistence of strict administrative environment coupled with cumbersome policies and procedures making it easier for people to work around
- vi. Presence of multi-agency collaborations e.g. Ministries, MMDAs, Professional bodies, purchasing, hiring, among other support functions
- vii. Resource constraints e.g. financial, human resource with limited expertise

II. “WHAT MAKES PUBLIC SECTOR PROJECTS MORE DIFFICULT TO MANAGE?”

From the above listed factors, the challenges of public sector project management can be grouped under the following categories:

Managing multiple relevant stakeholders: This emanates from the various stakeholders and interest groups that characterize public sector projects. As indicated earlier, the multiple layers of stakeholders can be a daunting task to manage and coordinate. This requires a lot of ego massaging, negotiations, conflict resolution, and communication and leadership skills. All of whom have to be consulted at a point in project delivery.

Adapting to political landscape with short term planning horizon: There is often lack of project continuity in the public sector in the event that government changes. Famous examples in Ghana include the affordable housing projects, Job 600 for

Parliament, Eastern Corridor road, The Sugar factory, Ghana National Identification System, etc all because of short political cycle (elections every 4 years), leadership changes goes a few tiers below.... usually accompanied by changes in top level positions in economically strategic organizations. It is often the case that the new people stop old projects for a while or abandon them altogether, start new ones in line with their vision without recourse to the public purse that might have been seriously injured.

Understanding local politics and administrative processes: *Directives*, policies, procedures and statutes may affect projects. Several of the cases of malfeasance in the public sector by new executives are not necessarily that they erred in intent, but because they did not strictly adhere to laid down administrative processes that govern the said institutions. There is need to use people skills, negotiation and contracting, business analysis to get teams together, understanding administrative policies and rules so one does not get entrapped.

Dealing with public scrutiny and backlash for failure: As public sector projects affect the general public and citizens as well as funding from public purse, failures get a lot of attention because they tend to have harmful effects for a lot of people. Also, public involvement and scrutiny of projects lead to shifting project scope by sponsors (political administration) in bid to please and satisfy the needs of the agitating public. This low tolerance for project failure in the public sector puts enormous pressure on project managers to deliver.

Contending with resource scarcity and budget constraints: Release of funds for projects are either delayed or frustrated along the line. This leads to contractors mainly local to rely on financial institutions to advance the needed funding to start or continue to a point to raise certificates for payment. This leads to compromising on quality and project specifications. In addition to this, the resource constraints of the public sector tend to impact project success, particularly that budgets and requests go through long approval channels. The human resource may also not have the expertise required to manage projects in most instances, and when consultants are brought in, the collaborations and support is lacking. Coupled with this is the public sector remuneration for project managers are normally not lucrative. Often the not so lucrative remunerations lead some project managers to compromise on project delivery specifications and time lines. I remember ever sighting the original Tetteh Quarshie Inter-change being three tier only for the finished product reducing it to two. The question that has been begging for answers is, who is to be blamed? The government? The Contractor? The engineers? The financiers? The staff of the Ministry? Etc

In recent years, it is evident that the demand for government sector projects has increased. The nature and complexity of the projects have also increased, and the array of stakeholders to consult, satisfy and involve have widened – from political administration, chiefs and community leaders, local politics and administrative rules, the legal requirements and the general public for whose benefits the projects are being undertaken. There is need for project management principles in the public sector. But often, project management is thought of as highly specialized private sector project professionals working for specialized companies in the pharmaceutical, construction, engineering and high tech industries. But several public sector organizations, the NASA and the UK Government have applied project management principles and techniques to highly improve the success of public sector projects. So rather than provide a list of public sector projects that have failed and ascribe reason for the failure, the focus should be on the impact of project managers.

The question then is, what does a project manager in the public sector in Ghana do to ensure that project management principles are properly applied to effect project success to the benefit of all stakeholders, particularly the general public and citizens? Project management is the application of skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project objective. The goal of project management is to maximize the return on project investment so that the project is completed on time, within budget and to scope and specification to achieve suitable measures of quality. The project manager is, therefore, responsible and accountable for setting realistic and achievable boundaries for the project and for leading the project team to complete the project within the approved boundaries and schedule. Project management is about creating the structures to manage a process to achieve project objectives.

The functions of the Project Manager encompass both core functions and facilitative functions.

1. Core functions entail effectively establishing the parameters to efficiently control the project. These include:
 - a) **Scope management** – define and manage all the work required to complete the project successfully
 - b) **Time management** – estimate duration of project activities and outline and follow acceptable schedule
 - c) **Cost management** – prepare and manage the budget for project success. Take note of the lags and delays in release of funds and resource constraints in the public sector

- d) **Quality management** – ensure the project satisfies stated specification needs for which it is undertaken. In a bid to help stakeholders like politicians achieve promises, some specifications are compromised to an extent that some eventually worsen the case of the beneficiaries. It is a common scene to see much needed projects such as clinics, markets, water points, schools, etc abandoned in towns and villages for lack of practicality to their usage.

2. Facilitative Functions

- a) **Human resources** – effectively engage people
- b) **Communications** – generate, collect and disseminate information time and accurately
- c) **Risk management** – analyze and respond to risks appropriately
- d) **Procurement management** – acquire and procure tools and project facilities
- e) **Stakeholder management** – identify key people who will be affected by the project, or who will affect the project. Continuously engage, consult and communicate with them on the project.

To be successful, project managers should effectively balance the core and facilitative functions.

- They should recognize the need to establish authority at the outset of the project. This is important in the public sector because of the variety and diversity of stakeholders and often political landscape. Authority places the project manager at a pedestal high enough to make clear cut decisions and not be at the whims and caprices of just anybody especially supervisors and colleagues.
- Establish scope to meet the requirements of the project management professional
 - In the civil service management structure, Project management is completely cut out thus making the project directorate staff in constant conflict with other directorates. Most often, Policy, Planning, Monitoring and evaluation directors believe that they should manage projects. Other times the Finance and Administrative Directors believe that they should manage projects. This administrative error as I term it keeps the projects directorate in limbo as to what the clear mandate of the professional is.
 - A major issue in the public sector, where there are various stakeholder interests is the establishment of clear scope for projects...success depends on ability to effectively manage changing project scope in the light of political landscape, resource constraints and human resource availability.
 - More importantly however is the herculean task of the Institute of Project Management Professionals to spearhead the engagement with the head of civil service to properly place the Project Management Professional on the civil service structure. I know for a fact that the accountancy professionals have done that and the Procurement Professionals are far advance in getting there.
- Monitor and control project activities to ensure they are delivered according to plan.
 - Track and review performance and progress
 - Identify changes to plan and make adjustments
 - Complete and close projects to satisfaction

Things to keep in mind when managing public sector projects:

1. Understand that friction may occur because of multiple stakeholder involvement, diversity in view and interests among the different agencies that have to interface and collaborate, public scrutiny and interest groups.
2. Think proactively, and spend more time preventing rather than resolving issues and problems on the project. It takes more time, in the long run to resolve an issue than to prevent it, although the later may take many days of thinking and effective planning. It is important therefore to thoroughly immerse yourself into the project, to understand the rationale and purpose, outcome and resultant impact, the stakeholders and interest groups, appreciate the scope, purpose and impact. This would help mitigate the aforementioned issues.
3. Take responsibility for communicating with the project team and all stakeholder and interest groups, and be realistic in your communication, do not pad nor be economical with information.
4. Put project interests above and beyond personal issues and interests.

The media, donor agency reports, government reviews and scholarship all point to the increasing project failure rate in the public sector. On the surface, it is the monetary losses that are evident. However, the most harm affects the general public and citizens for whom such projects were meant to benefit, improving their lives and enhancing standards of living. Whilst the discourse has often centered on the project failures and reasons for such failures, it is prudent as project management professionals to take a step back, and analyze the issues from the perspective of project management. Every project comes with a unique set of challenges, but that is not reason enough to admit failure.

It is up to us project managers and more especially Project Management Professionals to use our training and expertise to avert such issues and lead the project team to successfully complete the project. This is more important for project managers in the public sector as the projects we manage have far reaching audience and consequences should they fail for whatever reason. Let us navigate the public sector arena with our negotiation, contracting communication skills and techniques for goal setting, planning, monitoring and evaluation. In the end, the project management profession would be seen as important to attaining project success, and citizens would also get the intended impacts of public sector projects.

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