

The Role of Project Managers Attention on Last Mile Connectivity to Ensure Success

William Akoto Opong

School of Finance & Financial Management, Business University Costa Rica (UNEM)

Email: waoppong@gmail.com

Abstract

Most projects are planned properly and conceived rightly. However, they often fail because of poor implementation as well as flawed execution on the ground. Indeed, the last mile connectivity or closing the loop from planning to execution is what determines the success of projects. For instance, take the case of a typical construction project wherein the planning is perfect and yet it fails mainly due to on the ground problems related to lack of proper personnel management, issues with political stakeholders, and above all, the hands-off approach that most project managers embrace by leaving the actual implementation to their subordinates so of whom are either lacking in expertise or experience or have different agendas of their own. The term hands-off approach is something that is very critical as it is the case that project managers must involve themselves with on the ground nuts and bolts rather than sitting in air-conditioned offices and being removed from the on the ground realities. In addition, the fact that software projects often fail is due to the problems of flawed implementation from the last mile phase where the implementation team does not "connect" with the overall purpose of the project and instead, focuses on only on the last phase which might or might not be the key for successful implementation.

Keywords: Project Managers, Project Managers Attention, Project Mile Connectivity, Project Success

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Talking about last mile connectivity, take the case of telecom projects that often fail because the last mile connectivity is poorly planned and executed. Indeed, in the Indian context, it is quite normal for the Telecom Majors such as Airtel, Reliance, and Vodafone to announce grandiose schemes to lure customers only to be beset later by poor broadband links at the last mile, inadequate tower capacity for mobile networks, and above all, poor coordination and communication between the various components of the end to end value chain. How many times have we signed up to lucrative plans and offers from the Telecom Majors only to be faced with zero or unreliable connectivity during the times that we stay with such providers? Thus, it is quite important for project managers to ensure superlative last mile connectivity without which the success of their projects is not guaranteed.

1.1 How Multinational Firms Groom Their Managers

Indeed, this is the reason why many experts on project management often point to the need for thorough planning that leads to flawless execution by taking on all the components of the planning process and integrating them with the implementation process. This is also what is meant by closing the loop of the project cycle through planning that is complemented and supplemented by execution that takes into account the ground realities. So, how does a typical project manager ensure that last mile implementation is successful? To start with, he or she must have experience and expertise in implementation and awareness of the ground realities. For instance, it is often the case that corporates hire fresh graduates either from business schools or engineering colleges and make them project managers without testing them on the ground.

This is the reason why many multinational firms often mandate that fresh recruits work on the ground for a few years before being made project managers so that they gain valuable project implementation experience which then prepares them for the rough and tumble of project management. This is also the reason why marketing majors such as Proctor and Gamble, Unilever, and Johnson and Johnson often require fresh recruits to engage with the rural and last mile pockets in urban areas before they are made managers. Indeed, in our experience, we found that such firms often send the fresh recruits to go along with the salespersons and others on the ground such as Coke asking its recruits to be present in the delivery vehicles so that they gain valuable insights into the ground realities.

1.2 Awareness of On the Ground Realities

Apart from this, to be successful implementers, project managers must be cognizant of the on the ground political stakes and the personal agendas of labor unions and other human resources aspects. For this, they need to be acquainted with how the on the ground implementers work around the various problems they face and get to know their problems as well as any solutions that they might receive in the process. Indeed, project managers must have their “eyes and ears to the ground” to ensure that they receive feedback about what is going right and what is going wrong with the projects. Also, they should not abstain from taking feedback from the ground personnel and preferably, they must engage with them on a weekly or fortnightly basis if not more frequently.

1.3 Division of Responsibilities

It is not the case that project managers can do all these things and yet prove to be unsuccessful as far as the implementation is concerned. Thus, it is important for project management to be divided into the planning and implementation roles where the overall project manager has both the planner and the implementer reporting to him or her thereby ensuring that while there is a chain of command in place, it is also accompanied by close coordination up and down the organizational and project management hierarchy.

2.0 KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

2.1 Project Managers Have to Learn to Deal with Uncertainties and Risks

Project Management is the art and science of balancing competing interests, prioritizing the resources and their deployment, and is also situational in nature meaning that project managers often have to respond to evolving situations and circumstances. This means that uncertainty and unpredictability are the norms rather than the exception since each day brings with it new surprises and new events and incidents that can test the mettle of the project managers. For instance, a key resource might quit suddenly or fall sick and at the same time, the client might change the requirements or undergo a leadership change which means that there are new aspects that are brought to the table.

Further, the scope might change, or there might be a change in the technologies being used or the emergence of a new technology that can alter the scope and the direction of the project. Thus, project managers have to be prepared to deal with situations as they arise and learn to manage uncertainty and unpredictability. Indeed, the day in the life of a project manager is riddled with so many uncertainties that they must be prepared to deal with such risks on a macro as well as micro basis.

2.2 Using Data Driven Approaches Combined with Gut Feel for Better Risk Management

A good way to deal with uncertainties is to draw up a risk management plan wherein the project manager lists the risks that can be anticipated to the best of his or her abilities. This risk management plan would have to focus on a quantitative and qualitative enumeration of risks and potential risks and have a contingency plan to tackle such risks. Apart from this, the project manager can also use advanced technological tools such as Big Data and Artificial Intelligence to map the future challenges in ways that can anticipate much of the risks as far as possible. Having said that, it is theoretically as well as practically impossible to quantify all risks and this is where the project manager must use his or her Gut Feel to get a “hang” of the situation and proceed accordingly.

This means that adequate planning and thought to accompany such planning must go into making the risk management plan. As the saying goes, In God We Trust and the Rest Have to Bring Data, project managers must use data from past projects as much as possible to identify and plan for future risks. Indeed, this is where organizational capabilities and capacities in terms of using knowledge and learning from past experience come into play wherein the insights and the data from past projects can be used to prepare and anticipate future risks as much as possible.

2.3 How Project Managers Benefit from Knowledge Management Systems

Talking about knowledge from past projects, it is indeed the case that organizations that have good Knowledge Management Systems can help and chip in making the project managers make the transition from newbie approaches to a more balanced and thoughtful and experienced way of project

management. For instance, organizations such as 3M, Toyota, and Infosys have a very decent Knowledge Management System in place wherein they use past knowledge and historical data to prepare templates that Project Managers can use. Indeed, these days, most reputed organizations have a well-planned KM system in place that can be used by the Project Managers to deal with uncertainties and exigencies. In our experience, multinationals such as Citigroup and Indian firms such as Infosys have data stores that contain templates as well as elaborate risk management and mitigation plans to ensure that new projects have all the necessary information and knowledge in place to help the project managers in dealing with uncertainties.

2.4 Personal Sharing and Learning

Having said that, it is also the case that no matter how good the KM system those organizations have, project managers must meet up with other project managers to share learning and insights so that the Human Element and the Human Factor in decision making complements and supplements the needed knowledge that Project Managers gain from KM systems. Indeed, the best method to follow when dealing with uncertainties is to ensure that other project managers are “in the loop” as far as sharing of knowledge and insights are concerned. Thus, even the best of the breed of project managers must learn from the mistakes and successes of other project managers so that they do not repeat the mistakes and emulate the successes.

2.4 Quality Frameworks Such as SEI CMM can Help Organizational Evolution

Talking about learning and repeatability, it is also the case that quality methodologies such as SEI-CMM (Software Engineering Institute Capability Maturity Model) have defined processes in place to ensure that organizations achieve excellence in their Project Management Processes. For instance, the Five Levels of the SEI CMM model have well-defined processes so that organizations build capacities and capabilities and then repeat the successes and avoid the failures, and then learn from each iteration so that newer iterations are better than the previous ones. Thus, the SEI-CMM Model is widely used by services sector firms to achieve a level of excellence where all types of risks are anticipated or at least planned or even have comprehensive risk mitigation plans in place.

3.0 DEAL WITH DISRUPTIONS OF ALL KINDS

3.1 Disruption is the Name of the Game

We live in an age of disruption. Indeed, disruption is the norm rather than the exception and this means that firms, businesses, governments, and individuals have to be prepared to deal with disruptions of all kinds. Considering that project managers are tasked with executing specific projects in organizations that face disruptions, they must learn to deal with disruptions of all kinds. For instance, disruptions can be political meaning that there can be sudden changes in the larger political system through changing of governments and social disturbances due to political events. In addition, there can be economic disruptions wherein recessions and stock market crashes can impinge on the projects by funding cutoffs. While these are the larger disruptions that Project Managers have to contend with, there are other disruptions such as micro ones where key personnel might leave the organizations and the projects throwing the projects into jeopardy and at the same time, there can be changes to the scope and timelines of the projects that result in delays and cost overruns. Indeed, cost and time overruns happen in most projects mainly because of the disruptive effect of several or isolated events.

3.2 Preparing for Disruptions by Anticipating and Estimating their Impact

Turning to the specific ways in which project managers can prepare for disruptions, the best recourse would be for them to prepare a risk and contingency plan wherein they anticipate most of the risks in advance and prepare strategies to deal with them. For instance, it is quite common in large multinational organizations to have a dedicated unit devoted to risks and contingency planning wherein each project is required to submit a risk matrix and contingency plan that is vetted by the risk management unit. In addition, it is also the practice in large organizations to color code the risks and estimate their impacts and have backup plans in place. For instance, it is the norm to identify whether key people are likely to leave and prepare a matrix that indicates the chances of such events happening.

In my experience, I have found that it has become mandatory for project managers to anticipate most of the risks in advance and prepare accordingly. Apart from this, there is also the aspect of preparing for client driven demands about scope and cost that can lead to time and cost overruns. In this case, it is the practice to set aside a buffer of time and cost of the project so that such disruptions do not cause overruns that can result in the shrinking of the profits from the project.

3.3 The Known Unknowns and the Unknown Unknowns cannot be Anticipated

Having said that, it must also be noted that project managers cannot prepare and anticipate all the disruptions and the risks. For instance, given the recent spate of political and economic trends, it is simply not possible to guess and anticipate how sudden events such as Demonetization can be anticipated. Further, it is also the case that disruptions such as natural disasters like Earthquakes and Hurricanes cannot be anticipated in advance in addition to estimating the impacts of such events. Indeed, how much can one estimate the loss of life and property from natural disasters that can lead to key people and even the project managers themselves unable to attend to professional duties? Apart from this, no amount of data driven and metrics based risk and contingency planning anticipate the unknown variables from disruptions of any kind. Indeed, this is the case especially with developing countries where sudden social disturbances are simply too disruptive to anticipate in advance. To use the memorable phrase popularized by the former Defense Secretary of the United States, Donald Rumsfeld, there are known unknowns and unknown unknowns that simply cannot be anticipated in advance.

3.4 How Technology Disrupts

In recent years, technology has become disruptive as well and this is definitely giving project managers much headache and causing anxiety. The chances of a new technology or an app coming along suddenly and making the projects underway redundant and obsolete means that such events can be highly disruptive in nature. Further, with exponential and accelerating technological change, linear modes of thinking do not suffice and one has to constantly learn to spot and indentify risks before they can severely disrupt the projects. In addition, the fact that social media and 24/7 news cultures impinge on the marketing and sales projects by demanding project managers in such functions to keep an eye on what is happening to their customers in real time can be very stressful.

3.5 Gut Feel and Intuiting and Sensing Disruptions Can Help

Thus, the need of the hour is for project managers to think outside the box and bring in their extra edge that can make the difference between success and failure. This means that project managers must intuit and sense the impact of disruptions as they happen in real time without knee jerk reactions. In other words, project managers in contemporary organizations must be proactive instead of being reactive and this calls for constant vigilance and being always on the move.

4.0 TRANSITIONING TO AGILE

Walk into any business conference or eavesdrop on any discussion with managers and execs in the corporate world and the term, Agile, invariably pops up along with associated terms such as Kanban, Scrum, and DevOps. While these terms might seem “alien” to those project managers schooled in “traditional” Software Project Management Methodologies such as the SDLC or Waterfall methods wherein the linear and the sequential process was long considered the “gold standard” of project management. In recent years, just about any manager or exec is busy figuring out what Agile means and how this “emerging and hot” methodology needs more than a passing acquaintance to be adopted. In other words, while the “jargon” is indeed exciting as the term signifies nimbleness, agility, flexibility, adaptability, and a certain response to real time events just like the 24/7 world we live in, it takes much effort for those managers steeped in earlier generation project management methodologies. Having said that, it is also the case that most project managers do not really have a choice but to embrace Agile since customers are demanding it or it is a very useful methodology to adopt for any corporate in the present times.

4.1 What It Takes to Transition to Agile for Project Managers

So, if your organization is transitioning to Agile, and you as a project manager, would not like to be caught in a “time warp” or simply left behind, or made obsolete like the Dodos, there are some things that you can do. First, Agile requires more of a mindset change apart from the change in the structure of the way projects are executed. The point to note here is that Agile follows an Open Systems method where the distinctions between Designers, Developers, Testers, and Implementers as well as Support Personnel are all but obliterated and instead, a typical team member or for that matter, a Project Manager is expected to “wear all hats” and hence, everyone in the team has their roles “rolled into each other”. This can be disorienting to Project Managers used to thinking about each of these roles as “silos” and where each distinct role belongs to the corresponding team and hence, has designated Team Leaders. Indeed, in Agile frameworks, as soon as a customer request comes in or a bug is noticed in the software or the product, the assigned team member immediately, checks the request, designs and develops the fix, tests it using any of the automated tools, releases it into production, and then provides customer support for the same.

4.2 How Agile Works in the Real World

For instance, if Netflix or Amazon wants to release a particular piece of code or fix a bug, or as their business demands, release a new feature, Agile allows and enables them to do so in real time in a systemic manner rather than a “linear” and sequential manner. Indeed, using Amazon’s DevOps which is an Agile Methodology Software allows Agile teams to immediately attend to the next release in a real time manner. For Project Managers, it can mean the end of treating project management as a series of phases or steps wherein they keep track and monitor each phase in a sequential manner. Taking the example of an Ant Colony, one can observe how Ants “change their paths” and adapt to changing events while at the same time hoarding food and other things that they need. As the Queen Ant monitors, likewise the Project Managers too must be the ones who work with autonomous team members and monitor and track the overall progress. Apart from this, Agile Project Managers also need to understand that “ownership” of tasks and units of work is not as rigid as before and instead, such ownership is collective and team based.

4.3 Why Project Managers Must be the Jack of All Trades for Embracing Agile Framework

Recent research suggests that while Project Managers in their 40s are learning to keep pace with Agile, there are also enough indications that for those who fail to do so, the consequences can be quite painful. As news reports about the downsizing of Middle Managers indicate, automation and the emerging world of technology means that even the managers who were once the “rock stars” of cutting edge technologies in their times, can be at the receiving end. This is the reason why many organizations are appointing Agile Coaches would take the Project Managers “through the pace” and enable them to make the transition to Agile. Apart from this, Agile also calls for “transferable skills” wherein multi specialists and generalists are the norm. In other words, while earlier, team members and managers needed to be Master of a Specific Skill, now the saying, Jack of All Trades, is true as they need to be versatile and adaptable rather than be narrowly focused or excessively specialized.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is also the case that there must be clear communication between the different personnel in charge of planning and implementation so that any problems during implementation are fed back to the core team who can then work with each other and solve the problems. Project management is as much about the science of data driven learning as it is about the art of managing through personal capabilities. Thus, the best project managers are those who combine quantitative data driven approaches with the qualitative aspect of human and personality elements to manage their projects. Therefore, both objective, as well as subjective factors, must be taken into account for superlative project management.

The gut feels and the flight or fight impulses of the project manager would be extremely useful in dealing with disruptions. For instance, project managers must be prepared to stay put when required and take exits when needed. In addition, they must have a gut feel for dealing with disruptions that no amount of software and technology enabled risk management tools can help. When disruption is the name of the game, project managers must not drop the ball and be on the lookout for disruptions and learn to manage them.

As the world changes, newer methodologies would emerge to keep pace with changing external imperatives and this is the reason why all managers need to keep themselves “ahead of the curve” so that they do not miss out. Indeed, online learning websites such as this and employer offered training programs can be a good source of skill acquisition for managers wanting to transition to newer methodologies. Moreover, the mindset change needed for Agile can only actualize if you, as a manager, embrace an open minded attitude instead of being “fossilized” in the past where your comfort level is more. To conclude, exponentially accelerating technology needs corresponding changes in management methodologies and Agile represents one such framework.

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