

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

PROJECT COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN PUBLIC SECTOR PROJECT - BASED ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Project communication management comprises a set of processes required to manage the information needs of the project and its stakeholders are performed through effective information exchange. Increasing nature of community projects in public sector project-based organizations require project managers and team to effectively manage their communication with project stakeholders as it increases the level of the project success by satisfying different expectations of the stakeholders. In Vavuniya district, stakeholders, particularly the public are disappointed about the results of some recent projects since they have not solved the problems of the expected beneficiaries, therefore, the research explores the project communication management practices.

The study adopted a qualitative approach with interviews and focus group discussions to primary data collection in purposefully selected public sector organizations and public. The findings confirm PCM practices in public sector projects and how they are connected with the performance of the projects. Implications are imminent through the inclusion of the vulnerable and dealing with project communication management challenges.

Keywords: Project communication management, project communication management practices, project-based organizations, public sector projects, project success

1. Introduction

Communication is a primary managerial function that facilitates the execution of a plan by giving the direction on execution and allowing the team members to clarify their worries or convey the status of the progress through the feedback loop of the communication channels. Project Managers spend most of their time in communicating with the stakeholders of their projects (Rajkumar, 2010) and researches identify that one of the important reasons for the failures of the projects is the failure of proper communication with the stakeholders of the projects (Discenza & Forman, 2007), in deed, as Rajkumar (2010) describes “project management starts with a big C”. Nowadays, projects are widely prevalent and public sector organizations too are not exemptions to have projects, particularly a number of Sri Lankan public sector organizations such as Road Development Department, Road Development Authority, Building Department, Irrigation Department and National Drinking Water and Drainage Board can be described as Project-based organizations (PBOs) as their operations take place through projects.

In Vavuniya, these PBOs in the public sector, either under the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) or under the central government launch many projects every year in order to create unique products, services or results, therefore, they are expected to work with many stakeholders such as public, community - based organizations, pressure groups, and nongovernment organizations.

However, it is observed that few projects, such as new bus stand and dedicated economic zone, were criticized by the media and stakeholders for their delays in bringing them for their intended use. They highlighted that there is significant communication gap and failure between the project sponsor, project owner, beneficiaries, and the public because the completion of the projects did not resolve the particular problems people faced. People require more communication by the public sector PBOs in order to inform their priorities and needs and wants for future projects, to include the vulnerable people and their specific needs and in order to avoid money for the development projects to be returned without utilization. Importantly, public facilities that were developed by the public sector PBOs are known not used or underutilized by the expected public and did not bring desired results. Therefore, the research raises the question “what are the Project Communication Management practices and how they contribute to the success of the public sector projects in Vavuniya District?”

1.1 Research Questions and Objectives

Thus, the research established its main objective to explore the project communication management (PCM) practices in the public sector projects and how they contribute to the success of the projects. It also aimed to study how the public sector PBOs plan, manage and monitor and control project communications for their project; to explore how vulnerable / most vulnerable group of the project areas and their concerns are included in PCM and to assess the challenges in PCM practices and recommend on how to overcome them.

1.2 Significance and scope of the study

The research is significant because PCM practices are one of the main critical success factors in making a project successful (Pinto Slevin, 1987) and there is a general criticism that there is lack of PCM practices in the public sector. This increased the dissatisfaction among the stakeholders and public about the planning of the projects, meanwhile, it is important for the public servants and decision makers to have to find ways on how to avoid public criticisms in the future, because it is stakeholders who finally define the success based on the results (Müller and Turner, 2007 and Turner, 2009). The research scope is defined within the selected recently-completed projects of the selected public-sector organizations in Vavuniya district of Sri Lanka in order to explore the PCM practices and challenges.

2. Literature Review

PCM is one of the knowledge areas in project management that “includes the process necessary to ensure that the information needs of the project and its stakeholders are met through development of artifacts and implementation of active design to achieve effective information exchange” (PMI, 2017). Previous researches reveal PMs spend most of their time in PCM and its practices that determine the degree of the project success significantly (Rajkumar, 2010). PMI (2017) identifies PCM with three processes such as Plan Communications Management, Manage Communications and Monitor Communications that can become the foundation for the PCM practices for the PBOs together with the tools and techniques for project communication management practices. However, in a public sector project setting, PCM practices should be initiated from the initiation stage of a project to the closure, because failures in PCM practices may lead to identify a wrong project or challenges in implementation and controlling or a failure in yielding the expected results. Above all, failure of meeting different stakeholder communication requirements may hinder the project’s completion and success. The research adopted the theoretical framework that illustrates the relationship between the

three processes of PCM and project success that is simply defined by achieving the positive outcomes of the project.

3. Methodology

The research considered public-sector organizations that work with the projects in different levels in Vavuniya district, as population and conveniently selected five such organizations functioning divisional and district levels, based on the relatively easy and permitted access during the pandemic restrictions. The research adopted a qualitative design to answer for its research questions by collecting data about recently completed projects through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with thirteen duty bearers such as respective project managers and project team members and fifteen public members representing general public and beneficiaries. Limited participants were able to join during the data collection process due to pandemic restrictions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data and to interpret the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

The study confirmed PCM practices are important in managing projects in public sector, however, the PBOs in public sector undergo various challenges to be overcome. The results revealed the following important findings for the adopted research questions:

4.1 Main research question: What are the PCM practices and how they contribute to project success of the public sector projects in Vavuniya District?

PMs informed they mostly use monthly meetings, telephone-conversation, emails, Skype meetings and any other video conferencing media, meanwhile, duty bearers reported they frequently use meetings, letters and discussions. However, public viewed they generally participated in meetings and used letters to receive and share their project related information. It was identified top-level officers use available communication technologies but public and duty bearers use traditional meetings and letters. Muszynska (2015) identified direct oral communication: face to face communication, managing technology, communication technology, asynchronous and synchronous communication build trust and relationship by encouraging team members. Similarly, in Vavuniya district Public Sector Organizations also use these practices, though, building trust and relationship by encouraging team members was reported very rare. All project managers agreed projects which are under their control were successful and project communication management practices (PCMPs) are important for project to be successful. "Use of PCMPs contribute effectiveness of the project through the effective performance of the project team that leads to the project success" an interviewed Project Manager endorsed. In addition, another Project Manager argued "PCM practices is most important part of any single activity of projects". Moreover, the duty bearers rated project success is 50%, however, the public point of view is that project success is very rare in practice since it has not brought the expected result/s. Anyhow, all of the participants admitted obviously PCMPs contribute to the success or failure of any size of the projects, based on the degree of PCMPs, since they connect the stakeholders of the projects throughout the project lifecycle.

4.2 Sub-question 1: How do public sector organizations plan, manage and monitor and control their Project Communications?

Only Project Managers were raised this question and they stated, during the planning stage of projects, PMs widely use meetings (kick-off-meetings, GOTO meetings, DCC meetings), letters, E-mail, fax, notices based on the needs of the projects come out from the participatory rural appraisals

(PRA), participatory need assessments (PNA), and rapid rural appraisals (RRA) and they used tools and techniques such as expert judgment (PMI, 2017), intercom, communication technologies and data representation. In the execution stage their PCM practices were performed through emails, project management plans (PMI, 2017), document review, meetings and phone calls, in addition, they informed some tools and techniques like data presentation, feedbacks and expert judgment. In the monitoring phase, Project Managers used complain books, site visits and supervision reports, progress reports and document review as PCM practices with the tools and techniques such as expert judgment data representation.

4.3 Sub-question 2: How do they include vulnerable most vulnerable groups and their concerns into the projects?

All of the participants mentioned about the most vulnerable people (MVP) in their particular projects. Mostly, they have women-headed families, disabilities, widows and socially marginalized people as a vulnerable group. PMs, duty bearers and public all agreed the project team members and public (MVP) communicated well and participated in the projects effectively. MVP shared their needs and wants/ expectation to the project team, though, the project team performed their work with MVPs, some of the expectations were not met for supporting more for their normal life.

4.4 Sub-question 3: What are the Project Communication Management challenges they faced?

The study explored some key challenges. So, all participants mentioned misunderstanding (Abudi, 2013) is the biggest challenge, lack of feedback from the participants, ineffective phone conversation than face-to-face communication (due to the network problems in remote villages), Cultural differences, lack of body language, difficult to communicate people with physical disabilities, language barriers, use of jargons and over noises. Among them, the PMs highlighted misunderstanding between PM and team (Rajkumar, 2010) and team and communities; political issues, and disagreements between stakeholders and public. Meanwhile duty bearers underlined language barriers due to letters in Sinhala and difficulties to communicate with physical disabilities such as hearing or speech difficulties. Differently, the public prioritized the lack of access to communicate with top-level authorities directly.

4.5 Sub-question 4: How do the Public Sector PBOs improve their PCM practices based on their lessons learned from the past projects?

The participants in the interviews informed some of their suggestions to overcome those communication barriers they reported. Avoiding jargon, eliminate the noise or reduce the noise level, avoid overloaded information leading to misunderstanding, proper understanding nonverbal communications, more face-to-face or discussions or meetings rather than phone calls and after end of any meetings or discussion gathering feedback from the participants properly. The Project Managers insisted increased face-to-face meeting and collecting feed backs, meanwhile, duty bearers also demonstrated more direct meetings and use of clear and familiar languages. Similarly, the public preferred to meetings with top-level officers who could take decisions on the spot.

5. Conclusion

In summation of the research findings that gave considerable evidence in identifying the PCM practices are mostly used in the particular selected public-sector PBOs in the form of meetings, discussions, phone call conversations and written communications such as letters and notices. Likewise,

the research confirms literature that communication management is the most important aspect in the process of a project and managing projects. Without proper communication management practices, the information of the project does not reach the stakeholders of the project and communication is all in projects. The authorities use some tools and techniques of the PCM practices as identified by the literature. The study validates effective PCM is important for the project's success, particularly the project success to be defined by the public and stakeholders by the results. The selected organizations include the vulnerable groups of their projects. They also participated in the projects very effectively. There are important challenges to the PCM practices and participants are willing to eradicate them for making the projects successful. The research further highlights that the public-sector projects require more effective PCMPs to reach the public and their involvement and engagement in reaching the project outcomes.

This study focused on a small sample size, however, provided considerable information to gain theoretical insight into the research phenomena, therefore, the study recommends more direct face-to-face communications that enable participatory communication, giving voice of the vulnerable, feedback and more understanding of non-verbal communications.

The research study directs future researches with more participation of stakeholders, particularly with the rural communities and duty bearers in order to explore all the communication related challenges and best practices in detail to be properly generalized the findings for the success of projects through the results in the future.

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