EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAMS

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How do you measure the success of a project? Is it the fact that it has been delivered on time or to budget, or meets the client's needs or is profitable for the contractor? Or is it that every stakeholder's needs have been met when the project has been completed. If this is the real measure of success then an understanding of every stakeholder's needs as early as possible in the project is critical for successful delivery.

This paper will examine some of the pitfalls of the traditional project management approach, compared with the identification of project goals and use of facilitation techniques to achieve common ownership which will provide more cost effective solutions building on some of the value engineering concepts.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The approach to project management in the UK is much the same across all sectors and all types of project, whether it be minor refurbishment or major construction, and has been developed primarily to successfully meet the needs of the client in ensuring successful delivery against the criteria within which he is working. With the focus very much on project delivery, it has led to a fragmented rather than holistic approach to project management.

Project Structure

Projects are generally broken down into distinct phases, such as design, procurement, construction and commissioning. Although this provides focus in terms of project management each phase tends to be treated in isolation and on completion is handed on to the next phase together with responsibility for successful delivery. This "pass the parcel" approach also means that any problems and difficulties are also handed on at the same time.

The reality is that the later in the day the problem is found the more difficult it is to change or put right especially once the construction phase has started. It is no good the commissioning engineer identifying key design issues once he has commenced his phase of the project.

This approach to project management is driven by hierarchical thinking in UK management - packaging up areas of work and then attaching the appropriate responsibility while the work is carried out, before passing on to the next person in the chain. There is always a need for hierarchical structure but if this affects the way we make decisions on a project and assign responsibility, then it is a mechanism which will drive up costs and introduce delays.

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It is also noticeable in our project management phases that input from suppliers and also end users are not seen as major phases of the project, yet they have a major contribution to make to the success of a project.

Suppliers
Suppliers are capable of delivering cost effective solutions yet rarely get involved in the early design stages. We always look to complete detailed design before tendering for project suppliers, and are reluctant to change design criteria should the supplier offer viable alternatives. The earlier a supplier is selected at the initial design stage the more valuable his contribution will be in identifying the most cost effective final solution. More and more there is a tendency to involve suppliers as early as possible and select them not just on cost but also through their ability to provide alternatives before detailed design is completed.

End Users
How many production or operational personnel get involved in a project at the design stage? If this happens it tends to be the exception rather than the rule. Operational problems are usually unearthed at the commissioning phase often with temporary solutions (which become permanent) being adopted as once again it is usually a key design issue which needs changing. The end users live with these issues and get round them until monies can be raised at a later date to effect major changes. Yet none of this need take place if their knowledge and experience is brought in early on the project.

Value Engineering
The reluctance to involve the end users early in the design stage of a project is often caused by the perceptions of the Project Manager, who can see them as a generator of increased capital costs on the project. Value engineering is one tool which enables cost effective solutions to be delivered, but still invariably fails to provide the optimum whole life costed project solution and is very much a victim of the political and financial climate. If capital resources are available and revenue costs are being driven down then end users will place emphasis on spending capital up front against the wishes of the Project Manager. If the pressure is on reducing capital costs, however, then cost saving capital initiatives are put in place at the expense of operating costs, with the associated problems often coming home to roost in later years.

Project Mechanisms
The traditional approach to running a project is through establishing a steering group and a contract team. The contract team is led by the Project Manager and involves the designers, main contractor and end users. The goals of the team are to concentrate on delivery within budget and on time and are a problem solving forum often discussing issues in great depth. Those that cannot be resolved are passed up to the steering group who meet less frequently and monitor progress against targets and are also a problem solving forum who discuss issues in great depth often without the Project Manager being there.

If you were to suggest to both these bodies that more meetings should take place to resolve issues in a different way then they would be horrified with the thought of even more time being spent in meetings. How then can the approach to project management be improved to deliver better value solutions meeting the needs of all stakeholders. There must first be agreement on what a "successful" project looks like.

SHARED VISION

In order to establish a common understanding of the success criteria for all the stakeholders in the project, mechanisms must be in place to enable them to agree and support these principles. This can be achieved through each party identifying their own critical success factors so that all are aware of each others priorities. If we take one factor as an example - money - then it must be recognised and agreed that in the best interests of any project, the suppliers must make a profit, the Project Manager must meet his budget and the end user cannot suffer any adverse effect on operational costs. Without agreement that all three financial criteria must be met, then the project cannot be regarded as having common financial goals. If all parties recognise and agree that every stakeholder's critical success factors must be met then a successful project will be delivered. Once all the critical success factors have been explored and the effect on each stakeholder identified then common objectives can be set for delivery.

Barriers to Critical Success Factors
Identification of issues that will get in the way of delivering the critical success factors is the next phase of thinking. This brain storming exercise will put on the table all the potential issues experienced in the past by each of the stakeholders in the project which can then be prioritised by consensus, determining whether the issue has a high, medium or low impact on the project against the following two criteria

- the likelihood of the issue actually happening on the project
- the seriousness of its impact on the project

This mechanism will then provide the opportunity to prioritise any action planning that is required and provide an early understanding of the issues that will arise and also the time at which they require addressing.

Having determined the common goals and key issues then examination can be made of the structures required to manage the project throughout its life.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

To provide more effective management and involvement of stakeholders throughout the life of the project then the steering group must take a high level view of progress and a core project team deal with delivery.

Steering Group
A successful steering group is always focused on the end point of the project with a

high level project plan based on the critical success factors. This plan will identify at what point in the project major issues require addressing. It will have in place a procedure for handling issues which cannot be managed by the Project Manager. However, every issue received must be brought to the group with options and recommendations from the Core Project Team. The Steering Group must consist of senior representation from each major stakeholder together with the Project Manager, and must be perceived by the Core Project Team as a supporting body to their decision making and not a directing and controlling group.

Core Project Team
Unlike the traditional project team which regularly meets for contract meetings, the Core Project Team is tasked with delivery of the high level project plan and meeting targets set for delivery of critical success factors. Led by the Project Manager it again has representation from each of the key stakeholders and will set up sub-groups as appropriate to deal with contractual issues, design matters, a construction forum, and other groups which meet as the project demands. This group although meeting more frequently than the steering group is not there to discuss issues of detail but to manage and allocate tasks to the appropriate people or teams, and similar to the steering group is focused on a project plan based round the critical success factors.

PROJECT FACILITATION

Is the role of the Project Manager that of a technical expert ensuring that the right things are done by the various suppliers, or that of a process expert, ensuring that all the suppliers work together effectively? Usually the former is the case often at the expense of effective communications. It is very difficult when focusing on the task in hand to actually also see that all parties are signed up to the way forward. Another pair of eyes is needed.

Facilitating Role
This role is being used more and more to effectively support that of the Project Manager. The facilitator is not the project management expert but is there to ensure that the parties are working effectively together. Not only does this mean involving those stakeholders who are not contributing, but also controlling those who are trying to force their views on others.

The best facilitators require no in depth technical knowledge, but are excellent on process management and relationships. They can be invaluable in challenging technical terminology when others would not wish to display their ignorance. They can ensure the meeting stays focused, timely and decisions owned by all parties freeing up the Project Manager to concentrate on the technical issues.

Cultural Issues
Not only can facilitators understand the issues of UK stakeholders they can also ensure common understanding when international organisations are involved in meetings.

Clarification of terminology is even more important when similar terminology in another country can mean something completely different. It is also worth recognising that cultural difficulties can create disharmony within a meeting if they are not recognised and dealt with. Simple things like poor time keeping can cause offence with the Scandinavians and yet is accepted as the norm by the Italians. Recognition of these issues and management of them within the meetings is a key role for the facilitator.

SUMMARY

The competitive 1980's has not delivered the value for money solutions expected, and there is a recognition now that benefits must be achieved for both client and supplier if a project is to be successful. The legacy of late delivery and claims is being replaced by a more open and honest relationship between client and supplier, but adversarial attitudes to those outside this partnership continue to exist, and can only be overcome through involvement and reward.

Traditional approaches to project management do not regard those outside the project hierarchy as critical to its success, yet their involvement will not only remove barriers but can deliver significant financial benefits.

The earlier the involvement of all stakeholders, the more cost effective the end result, and mechanisms to involve them as early as possible in the project design, especially the suppliers, will reap enormous dividends.

Project Managers who are not only experts but can deal with processes and relationships are few and far between and consideration must be given to the use of facilitation skills in support of the expert role of Project Manager if a successful outcome is to be achieved.