

Project Management Trilogy Challenges in Africa – where to from here?

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Abstract

In Africa like in other continents, projects are becoming a way in which organizations (public and private) fulfill their business plans. Project management still remains a Cinderella field across the continent. On average 8 out of 10 projects managers are accidental or have inadequate PM knowledge base; PM training is characterized by curricula falling short of some fundamental knowledge areas of PM; and organizations (within public and private sectors) which are fundamentally supposed to be centered on programs and portfolios are in practice project oriented organizations (POO) by default characterized by archaic and fragmented systems. These challenges, which are referred to in this paper as 'PM trilogy challenges' have significantly contributed to a confusing environment if not corrected could take away the potential of PM in business success and public sector development. Results of five research projects are used in this paper to identify the issues which have led to 'PM trilogy challenges'. Finally recommendations are advanced towards addressing these challenges.

Introduction

There is sufficient evidence to strongly suggest that most future growth and successes of public and private sector organizations will result from successful development of projects: that generate new and state of the art infrastructure facilities, excellent public domain services to citizens and sustainable policies which will create a conducive environment for appropriate investments; and new products, services, or procedures respectively. According to Graham and Englund (2004), such projects will also be a principal way of creating organizational change; implementing change and growth strategies will usually also be entrusted to project managers. However, they argue, project success is often as much as results of the organizational environment (with public and private sectors) as of the knowledge (authors emphasis) and skills of the project manager. Current assessments of various projects across the African continent based on various studies (Rwelamila 2010a; Rwelamila 2000; Ssegawa and Ngowi 2009; Rwelamila and Phungula 2009) paint a picture of project failures across public and private sectors supporting Graham and Englund's (2004) argument. The majority of failed projects depict the following umbrella dimensions:

Inefficient projects – projects failing to meet budget and schedule expectations; *Weak impact on customers/stakeholders* – projects unable to meet technical specifications, unable to address customer/stakeholders needs, and unable to create projects that satisfy clients/stakeholders needs; *Unsuccessful business/or unsuccessful development strategy* – projects not achieving significant commercial success (private sector) or development programmes/projects unable to achieve developmental goals (public sector); and *Unsustainable potential* – projects unable to add value.

For most projects, the above failed projects umbrella dimensions have resulted into specific issues, which are the opposite of what Pinto and Slevin (1988) referred to as project critical factors. It is thus important to refer to these issues as African project failure symptoms cutting across all sectors. These symptoms include:

(i) *Clients/Stakeholders dissatisfaction with final products or services* – ultimate intended users or beneficiaries have not accepted what projects have finally delivered; (ii) *Most of project missions have been archaic* – the majority of projects are completed without initial clarity of project goals and general directions; (iii) *Poor synergy between POO management and project coal face management* –

for a majority of POOs there is very little willingness of top management to provide the necessary resources and authority for project success; (iv) *Most projects do not have appropriate schedules and plans* – no detailed specifications of the individual action steps required for project implementation; (v) *Poor consultation with stakeholders/clients* - for most of the programmes and projects, communication, consultation, and active listening to all impacted parties are inadequate; (vi) *Poor project personnel recruitment and selection* – consultants and POOs do not seem to have appropriate plans for recruitment of project managers and core team members; (vii) *Poor monitoring and feedback* – a significant number of projects face late provision of comprehensive control of information; (viii) *Poor communication* – there is a significant number of projects which suffer from non provision of appropriate network and necessary data to all key factors in project implementation; (ix) *Poor troubleshooting strategies* – most projects suffer from inability to handle unexpected crises and deviations; (x) *Incompetent project managers* – most people who assume positions of project managers are technical experts and incompetent administratively, interpersonally and technically (project specific); (xi) *Excessive power and politics* - it is common to find high degrees of political activities within organizations and perceptions of projects furthering self-interests of organization members; (xii) *Negative impact from environmental events* – dominant external organizational factors (especially within the public sector) impacting on operations of project teams negatively; and (xiii) *Urgency is an elusive word* - for most of public sector projects, the need to implement projects as soon as possible remain a pipe dream.

All these symptoms represent a significant plethora of bad practices which need to be addressed if project management (PM) is going to remain as a means by which public and private sector organizations achieve their objectives in Africa. Project management's ability to provide organizations with powerful tools that improve their ability to plan, implement, and control their activities as well as the way in which they utilize their people and resources will need to be practiced from the position of **understanding its characteristics** and what constitute **PM best practices**.

The authors are convinced that the journey towards understanding PM characteristics and universally acceptable PM best practices should start from addressing the challenges which have led to the African project failure symptoms described above, hence the need to address the causes of these symptoms.

A closer scrutiny of various research reports and discussions with various key authorities within public and private sector involved in projects has led to identifying the causes of the above symptoms. There are three key causes of the symptoms. These causes are key to this paper and are referred to as '**PM trilogy challenges**' and include:

(i) The confusion of equating technical specializations with project management competences - the emphasis on technical aspects of projects over socio-cultural issues; (ii) Inadequacy of PM training programmes (both on the job and outside the job); and (iii) Lack of strategic project management in POOs

The above project failure causes are discussed in detail in the preceding sections and finally recommendations are advanced towards addressing them.

Background to 'PM Trilogy Challenges'

In Legum's (2002) seminal work on 'A new economy for South Africa and the world', she refers to the orthodoxy in vogue that the competition between nations and between the individuals is not only inevitable, but will result in the greater happiness of the greatest number. The same argument could be raised that PM development has centred on 'orthodoxy' to the detriment of developing the PM profession and approaches in managing projects. As will be discussed later the 'PM trilogy challenges' are result of PM orthodoxy in Africa, where POO executives, professional voluntary organizations leaders and higher learning institutions leaders have violated authenticity, they stand like the naked emperor: they think they are clothed, but everyone else sees the truth. Each of the three

project failure causes is discussed and PM orthodoxy thinking revealed and how to address the situation towards solutions in the following sections.

(a) The Confusion of Equating Technical Specializations with Project Management Competences

Despite the heightened need for competent project managers in Africa, traditional project management still pervades the project landscape. Traditional project management is often conducted through intuition and experience. In a majority of cases, individuals are appointed as project managers because they have qualifications in the same field as the project's core business.

The traditional arrangement has led to some serious deficiencies and failures. Though no other study has empirically provided a causal link between project failure and lack of project competence, research (e.g. Ssegawa and Ngowi, 2009) has provided a strong indication in that direction. Failures are most often related to a lack of understanding of the underlying issues relating to project management. Literature (e.g. CIOB, 2002; Sarna, 1994; Rwelamila, 2008 and Gadeken, 1994) have also emphasized that though project management experience is needed in managing projects, if used alone is insufficient to yield favourable results.

There is agreement in literature (e.g. Crawford, 2005 and Alam *et al.*, 2007) that competence is a multi-faceted construct. The exact list of factors contributing to competence is usually not agreed on. The most common are illustrated in Figure 1. The figure shows that there are four major contributors to competence namely knowledge inputs, skills, experience and continuous professional development (CPD). In this case knowledge input factors lead to acquisition of skills and when combined with experience in a conducive work environment, this should lead to competence in project management. It has been suggested, for example, by Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Taylor, O'Driscoll and Binning (1994) that a knowledge base, appropriate pedagogy, suitable disposition of the trainee, a conducive and well endowed training environment are crucial in knowledge acquisition. PM knowledge base is the information, tools and techniques that an individual acquires and by using it on a task, skills are acquired and used towards accomplishing project decisions, processes, functions and tasks.

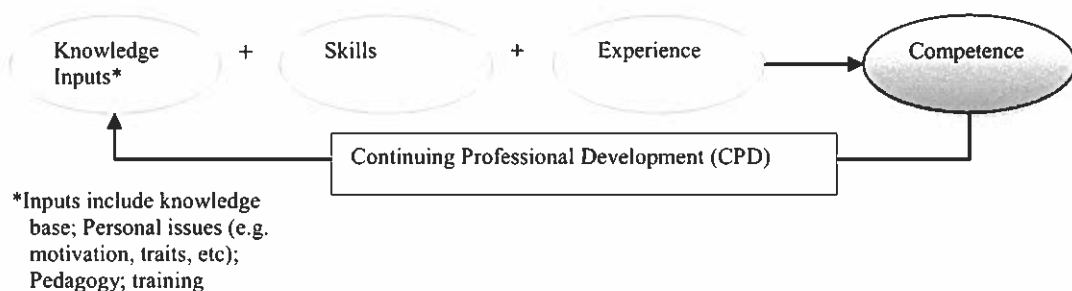


Figure 1: Factors Leading to Achieving PM Competence
[Source: adapted from Taylor, O'Driscoll & Binning. (1994); Baldwin and Ford (1988), Crawford (2005), Spencer and Spencer (1993), IPMA (2007); Alam *et al.* (2007)]

There is sufficient evidence (Ssegawa and Ngowi, 2009) to suggest that most people in Africa become Project managers by accident. The common path to become a project manager across public and private Sectors is through expertise in a technical speciality.

As indicated above (Figure 1), accidental project managers do not have PM knowledge inputs but what could be called 'PM bits and pieces' of what is required. In the light of all this, appointing accidental project managers is not appropriate. Those who appoint PMs need to insist on and assist in the

development of individuals with the best aptitude to become successful project managers.

(b) Inadequacy of PM Training Programmes

The argument for postgraduate training in project management (whether generic or sector/industry environment specific) in Africa, requires higher institutions of learning to have appropriate programmes to train a knowledgeable project manager. In order to assess PM training Programmes appropriateness, Rwelamila (2007a) carried out a synthesis and analysis of literature on PM knowledge base and best practices which resulted in what may be termed as a well-balanced project management course covering seven broad topic areas as indicated in Table 1. The dimensions were used in Ssegawa and Rwelamila’s (2009) study of 7 premier PM programmes in Africa as a yardstick for the required knowledge needed for a competent PM.

Table 1: Project management curriculum dimensions

Main Dimensions	Broad Sub-dimensions
PMCK1: Planning techniques (PT)	Ability to put together a project plan - project planning; estimating; and risk analysis techniques
PMCK2: Behavioural aspects of PM (BAPM)	Team building; motivating team members, and networking (dealing with upper managers, contributing department managers and other stakeholders) – the core team dynamics and maneuvering through a web of political games.
PMCK3: Controlling techniques (CT)	Project monitoring, project reviews; skills for meetings; project audit techniques; and project close-out techniques.
PMCK4: Organisational issues (OI)	Techniques for managing across organizations when the PM has all the responsibility and little authority – issues of organizational structure (projectized, functional and matrix structures and they dynamics).
PMCK5: Business fundamentals (BF)	Business of the organization; how decisions affect the bottom line, how to run a project as if it were a business.
PMCK6: Marketing and customer issues (M&CI)	Techniques of defining and developing a market; understanding the needs and desires of the project’s customers and end users.
EPMK: Creating an environment for successful projects (CESP)	Change to project-based organizations; strategic emphasis for projects and portfolio and programme management; developing a core team process; developing PM in the organization; organizing for PM; understanding upper management influence; developing a learning organization, planning for project manager selection; and developing a PM information system.

Source: Gardiner (2005); Graham & Englund (2004); Rwelamila (2007a); Pinto and Slevin (1988); Pinto and Slevin (1987); Pinto, and Prescott (1988)

Ssegawa and Rwelamila’s (2009) findings indicated that out of the seven programmes, six were found to be inadequate in content. Apart from project [management] techniques (PT), content gaps were identified in all the other six dimensions of a programme. A closer look at the syllabi of the programmes, led the authors to believe strongly the inadequacy was brought about by one or a combination of factors.

Firstly, it appeared the programme designers wanted to emulate particular Body of Knowledge (BoK) of some of the professional organizations. However, the author’s opinion is that the approach was fraught with problems; for example, within the last fifteen years the Project Management Institute (PMI) has produced three versions of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK) (PMI, 1996, 2000 and 2004) each with changed contents. The Association of Project Management Body of Knowledge (APMBoK) has also gone through a similar evolution leading up to its latest 4th edition

(APM, 2006). Perusing through the two BoKs one may note that APMBok strongly emphasises the connection between organisational strategy and a project (Morris, Jamieson and Shepherd, 2006). The PMBoK on the other hand emphasises the project management processes required to plan, implement and close a project – project management efficiency. In addition, a look at a number of project management books will alert a reader that most authors agree on the project life-cycle phases but not precisely on the actual processes and hence the skills expected in each phase (Ward, 1999).

Additionally, it was noticed that some of the syllabi were designed in a manner that reflected the experience or the professional inclination of the programme development team.

(c) Lack of Strategic Project Management in POOs

According to Graham and Englund (2004), forces outside both public and private organizations are currently pushing the need for project management. An important shift in the market place is that customers who were formerly content with products and services now demand total solutions to problems in the private sector (Doyle, 2008). In the public sector citizens are demanding sustainable and state of the art infrastructure and balanced services.

In Africa, a number of studies (for example: Rwelamila 2007b; Rwelamila and Phungula 2009; Tembo and Rwelamila 2008; Rwelamila and Asalan 2010; and Rwelamila and Govender 2008) have found that projects seem to appear almost randomly in organizations which are supposed to be POO. In most of these organizations projects are unlinked to coherent strategies and upper managers are unaware of the total number and scope of projects being undertaken.

Addressing ‘PM Trilogy Challenges’ – where to from here?

The new frontier of project management in Africa includes a vision to make citizens and corporations happier and more productive; the reality involves applying and improving scientific project management processes. These steps require leadership in a changing and fast-moving environment. The starting point is to address the ‘PM trilogy challenges’.

Dealing with the Confusion of Equating Technical Specializations with PM Competences

Ability in technical expertise (e.g. marketing, finance, geology, economics, IT, engineering or architecture) is not an overriding indicator of the effectiveness of a project manager. It certainly provides increased credibility on the job for the core business of the project but most often is elevated in importance beyond what it deserves. Project managers need to have leadership potential, hence one of the knowledge base running thread in any project management programme curriculum.

An effective project manager is a “technological entrepreneur” (Graham and Englund 2004:192), who can do each of the following:

As a “technological entrepreneur” there are six competencies that distinguish outstanding project managers from their contemporaries:

Sense of ownership and mission – responsible for the project and other broader organizational issues; Political awareness – knows who influential players are, what they want and how best to work with them; Relationship development – spends time and energy getting to know project sponsors, users, and contractors; Strategic influence – builds coalitions and orchestrates situations to overcome obstacles and obtain support; Interpersonal assessment – identifies specific interests, motivations, strengths, and weaknesses of others; and Action orientation – reacts to problems energetically and with a sense of urgency.

The above strongly reinforces the argument that any technical expert who wants to become a project manager should attend an appropriate project management course internal or external to his or her employing organization.

Dealing with the Inadequacy of PM Training Programmes

There are strong indications to suggest that higher learning institutions, particularly those in Africa, are not offering programmes which have adequate PM knowledge base to produce a competent project manager with appropriate knowledge. Most of the project management programme courses are dominated by a technical knowledge base (scope, WBS, schedules, resource allocation, baseline budgets, and status reports) of managing 'the project' – primarily focusing on the 'project coal face'. Very little is covered under socio-cultural knowledge base (leadership, problem solving, teamwork, negotiation, politics and customer expectations).

The inadequacies are significant to warrant a conclusion that PM training programmes in Africa exhibit a clear gap and need extensive reviews. It is hence recommended that any review of a PM programme in Africa should be conducted in a well structured manner following the proposed project management curriculum broad topics indicated in Table 1.

Dealing with the Lack of Strategic Project Management in POOs

As clearly discussed above, aligning organization portfolio of projects so that their contributions to the organization's objectives are maximized calls for formal coordination to ensure that each project's actions move in narrow-like fashion towards organizational targets. Both sector organizations (public and private) current 'grenade on the wall' approach, in which the business/organizational planning staff identifies and characterizes the project and then tosses it to uninformed and uninvolved project management group that is supposed to complete the projects doesn't work because it negates all the principles of a core team, which is central to any project success – the need for 'buy in'. The need for 'buy in' from all stakeholders is the tributary of concurrent engineering, an approach which is embedded across POO's PM best practices.

The current non existence of organization-strategy-to-project transition, characteristic in 8 out of ten POOs because of so-called fine past performances by both organization planning people and project management people need to be avoided. The following questions (Dinsmore 1999) should form a checklist for senior executives and sponsors to help make sure the organization projects are aligned:

Is the organization committed to using project management strategically?; Is there a policy of formally preparing project charters?; Is synergy created between the organization business group and those responsible for project implementation?; and How can senior management make sure that projects don't veer away from chartered objectives?

Conclusion

Project failures in Africa are creating a focus on the need to change the way projects are managed, people in every organization need to learn that this change profoundly will affect the entire organization. Successful projects will require participation from many parts of organization in dealing with the '**PM trilogy challenges**'. Turning the '**PM trilogy challenges**' around to PM best practices as discussed above will require a coordinated effort involving all departments in an organization in conjunction with national establishments responsible for training and procurement policies. Doing nothing about the '**PM trilogy challenges**' is to curse the darkness and turning the '**PM trilogy challenges**' around to PM best practices is to light the candle.

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