

Project Management in a Third World Environment

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First of a Two Part Instalment

This instalment will look at six elements that should be built into a project's third world management and the second part will describe how a project's infrastructure can bring these elements together.

Conventional management works for organizations that are relatively stable with structures that are intended for permanency and possess a high degree of adaptability for growth in an ever-changing world. The organization's corporate intelligence and memory support the gradual evolution of decision making while core services remain indispensable. The organization evolves from its history with players that are protected by laws, contracts, union agreements and social networks. The intelligent organization establishes a stable physical and social footprint that is designed for diversity and it is this diversity that lends the organization to undertake projects.

Projects on the other hand are dynamic, temporary and almost ephemeral over the span of time. They are conceived relatively quickly, for a specific purpose and for a limited time as an adjunct to the organization's mainstream activities. Once a decision is made to implement and execute a project, the project departs from the organization's infrastructure with needs that differ from the organization's management of financial controls, human resources, administrative support, planning and accountability. And this departure increases in significance in relation to the project's conceptual and physical distance from the organization.

The writer is reflecting upon experiences gained from operations in the third world where infrastructures are unstable and compounded by unstable regimes holding to maintain supremacy while they collaborate with expatriate funders that are furthering their own geopolitical agendas. Into this soup of convergence enter the managers with local or expatriate employees who apply funds and practices intended to produce positive changes or profits against a backdrop of extensive challenges and finite budgets. Standards are easily compromised by the bottom line and regularly lowered to accommodate local conditions. A cautionary note should be trumpeted to articulate some standards for the effective management of these projects and the following is intended for that purpose – a caution against losing sight of what should occur when one is charged with managing a project, far

from the parent organization and steeped in local conditions.

The greatest need that seems to be minimised is the need for communications in a fluid environment. Managers and employees need to talk to each other, particularly when operating over geographic distances plagued by debilitating transportation, weak telecommunications and fragmented internet services. Communication is required to maintain the achievement of project objectives and to sustain personal and working relationships. This means ensuring interpersonal contacts with face to face meetings, clear and continuous telecommunications as well as stable internet connections that support the rapid, spontaneous communications required to resolve regularly unfolding problems ensuing from staff issues and the whims and urgencies of local partners. Without an effective communications infrastructure and principles, small problems accrue to threaten or devastate a project's outcomes. The costs for such an infrastructure are not to be minimized. At the onset of a project, budgets for travel and for effective internet-telephone connections must be realistic and sufficient to ensure people can talk to each other as frequently and clearly as needed. The costs are significant and they can be rationalized at the onset of a project. However, as the project evolves toward an end date, that expense becomes prohibitive.

Third world project management requires effective delegation – by the parent organization to its on-the-ground operatives. While delegation over distance can be risk laden, the solution is not to micro manage a project over the distance. Such micro management is often the result of a lack of reflection and attention to detail that requires a compensating measure to ensure the exercise of effective controls by the parent organization. If effective delegation is not in place, the default is to micromanage for fear of losing control. And what does effective delegation require? This presents no mystery as the same rules for delegation apply in this context as elsewhere. Clarity is required as to who does what, who has authority for what and who reports to whom. These are usually encased in principles, protocols and procedures that in, sufficient detail, place and hold the diverse actors within a reciprocal framework. And a precursor to this element is the selection of performers at both ends of the project – organization relationship who have the competence to follow through, exercise judgment and communicate effectively throughout. Hence the need for communication that transmits directives to the project, supports the dialogue required of clarity and lends itself to the reports and accountabilities that will sustain the project.

In keeping with delegation is the need to ensure clarity of the roles and responsibilities exercised by all the various parties to the operation of a project. This lends itself to the guards, drivers, logistic specialists, administrators, technical specialists whether they be engineers, jurists or accountants and the project director who must know the

parameters of their duties and how they interface within a comprehensive organizational chart. Such a chart is required to describe the project's chain of command, a concept that seems to have fallen in disfavor with the popular concept of democratizing the workplace. While democratic decision making is an essential part of effecting sound decisions and promoting synergy, an undeniable factor is that persons must exercise authority as granted by their position within a project's infrastructure. Hence the need to "tell it like it is" and respect the ensuing boundaries. A project is or should be work plan driven particularly when it involves employees or consultants who are working at distances far from the project's headquarters. This is usually exacerbated by the lack of time and money that drive the need for closer collaboration and the coordination of resources. While work plans provide a critical tool, often neglected is the need to develop and monitor their progress. In a first world country where technological infrastructures exist along with adequately trained staff, off-the-shelf software can assist the work plan process. However, where these are lacking, the return of information on work plans, the assessment of such information and the corresponding communications from headquarters to the field offices are labour intensive, even with a modicum of technological assistance. Accordingly a project should build in the capacity to train people on the work plan process and provide the resources to manage its maintenance.

These elements are essential to manage a third world project where the fluid environment calls for a great deal of flexibility. No matter how well planned or resource estimated, the project will quickly come into its own to deal with factors not affecting the parent organization. Along with the political and military instabilities, project staff are working against the inertia and resistance with which the human condition usually responds to change. Working within different languages, their dialects and other cultural or tribal differences in a setting where security concerns may be paramount makes for interesting and rewarding experiences. However, these factors have a human toll for the expatriates brought into the project as well as for the locals who are so employed. Hence the need for a consistent program to manage and support the project's human resources. The project's management needs to integrate local laws, expend the time and energy to recruit the right personnel, invest in the training, maintain effective supervision and retain the flexibility to make sudden staff changes. Ensuring employees and consultants are deliberately supported both professionally and personally calls for adequate financial compensation, suitable benefits, inclusion in the project's decisions, personal contact with supportive supervisors and colleagues and persistent attention to the morale of the projects as it unfolds.

Finally, as projects are time limited, the developmental plans should also address closure. Aside from disposing of acquired assets, cleaning environmental footprints and finalizing closure reports, particular attention is required for the project's human resources. After two years of a three year contract, employees and consultants start worrying about the next assignment while the project may be in its

final urgent strokes to achieve the predetermined objectives. This is not the time for staff migrations that may dissipate the project's expertise when it is most needed. The end-of-project phase also creates interpersonal issues with personal relationships facing closure, uncertainties and stress about future employment and unresolved labour differences. And as the project nears its end, the interpersonal dynamics change with each departure of its employees. A sound closure strategy can address most of these issues, but if there isn't one to apply, project closure can quickly become an unpleasant experience that may well affect the project's final outcomes and reflect upon the parent organisation's reputation as an employer.

Once the project submissions have been made, the project approved, the budget finalized and the contract signed, what do the project officer of the parent organization and the person in charge of the project? Of interest is what they should install on the ground and how they should do it.

Part 2 to follow ...

* André is presently on assignment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to assist the Congolese government with the development of four pilot court locations as part of its rule of law rejuvenation project.