

THE CHALLENGE AND BENEFITS OF USING PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES IN MILITARY EDUCATION: WH-QUESTIONS AS QUALITY CATALYSTS

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Abstract: *The present coordinates of the world we live in pose various challenges, amongst which education is an essential one. When approaching military education, the effectiveness of the courses and training processes can sometimes make the difference between life and death.*

The hereby article argues that a pragmatic business-like approach to implementing new educational programmes in the military may contribute significantly to increasing the usefulness of the courses provided within the system. More precisely, the author sustains the idea of addressing questions such as why or what is needed, and particularly who is involved and who are the beneficiaries of these programmes.

Keywords: *military education, project management, course implementation, resources, customers, communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's business environment is dominated by rapid and continuous change, which has resulted in reshaping organisational approaches in order to enhance their performances or "agility", which means "not only to react quickly to changing technology as well as changing markets, but also to be responsible for technical and market change" (Hauschildt and Schewe 2000, p. 96). In achieving this goal, project management holds a privileged position as it combines the present organisational

tendencies – delayering, teamwork, flexibility, employee participation, entrepreneurialism (Teare and Monk 2002) – for the purpose of "bridging the gap between the vision of the future and the current reality" (Dolan and Garcia 2002, p. 109).

This paper argues that the application of the basic principles of project management may contribute to the successful implementation of a new educational program even in the context of a military establishment, which is traditionally regarded as pyramidal and less permeated with creativity and initiative.

2. FUNDAMENTALS OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT – A SUCCINCT LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Meredith and Mantel Jr. (2000), “a project is usually a one-time activity with a well-defined set of desired end results” (p. 9).

The nature of this project can be juxtaposed to Balachandra’s (2000) view, according to which one must consider the project management “contextual variables”, that is, the nature of the innovation – incremental or radical, the nature of the market – existing or new, and the nature of technology – familiar or unfamiliar.

In establishing the project purpose, clarity is a crucial prerequisite for “to deliver a project well we must understand why it is needed and what it is for at the start of the planning process” (Webster 1999, p. 241).

In this phase, the commander should act as the main internal change agent and establish “a managerial infrastructure” (Dale and Cooper 1994) to facilitate the project initiation. Also, the importance of this “why phase” (Webster 1999) cannot be overstated, because lack of clarity results in “significant amounts of expensive rework which emerges well into the project implementation phase” (Webster 1999, p. 240).

Although Lock (2001) argues that time, budget and quality are project objectives because failing to meet them affects the project effectiveness, the organisation’s approach may

follows Webster’s (1999) view, according to which time and budget answer the question “*how should the project be done?*”, whereas people represent the ones “*who should be involved*” in it.

The project is initiated by considering what Cicmil (1997) identifies as “project context”: stakeholders, end-users, and risk factors. Thus, the stakeholders are the members of the departments, sections, or divisions, because a collective effort is necessary to ensure the project success. The end-users are the students for the course has to meet their needs and expectations both in terms of compatibility with their previous knowledge and in terms of relevance to their future perspectives. The risk factors may occur when that the course is a new enterprise, and consequently no prior experience or feedback is available.

The project manager should be given autonomy to approach the task, which results in two positive aspects: project manager’s empowerment on the one hand, and enhanced organisational communication on the other hand, which are seen as essential motivating factors (Roehling 1997). Thus, the potential negative effect of the senior management’s interference and exercise of power (Elangovan and Xie 2000) is overcome, and the project manager perceives the task as a challenge and opportunity to exert personal and expert power with “positive effects on subordinates’ commitment, satisfaction and performance” (Cheng 1994, p. 55).

In terms of identifying the end-users' needs and expectations, as well as minimising the risk factors, the following steps may be taken:

the students' selection criteria are analysed in order to evaluate their acquired knowledge level and subsequently to adapt the course difficulty level;

in order to maximise the compatibility between all the course modules within the overall curriculum and syllabus discussions are initiated with all the teaching staff;

the course should also be regarded as a facilitator in the new learning environment, fostering a positive attitude among colleagues, tutors, and educational process. As a result, the teaching materials have to focus on case studies, quizzes, discussions, whose purpose is to enhance communication and team/group work skills as well as to create a friendly and open classroom environment. As studies (Ingram et al. 2001) reveal, the teaching process is more effective when it involves simulation, interaction, and participation because the skills and attitudes learned through these approaches help individuals to become reflective practitioners interested in lifelong learning.

During these stages, the project manager closely collaborates with the members of the teaching department, whose opinions and feedback are used in order to decide upon the course contents and optimal teaching techniques and objectives. The most used collaboration methods are informal meetings and unplanned

discussions, which help to prevent the "three key sources of team conflict: disagreements over goals and priorities, personality clashes, and communication problems" (Gent et al. 1998, p. 254). Thus, the preparatory phase of the project is finalised, and the project background information is gathered.

The next stage may be identified with Cicmil's (1997) "project content", which involves details regarding the scope and constraints of the project. In this context, corporate communication plays a pivotal role in clarifying the course requirements as it facilitates the ability to "appreciate multiple viewpoints, work with multiple stakeholders, be flexible and pragmatic, take risks and be innovative" (Steiner 2001, p. 151).

Mention should be made that during the entire process, the project manager informs the senior management on the progress of the project. One may regard this as a restriction to employee empowerment with negative effects on staff motivation considering that "the old model based on the hierarchical control of employees must unquestionably evolve" (Dolan and Garcia 2002, p. 101). However, experience has proved that the leader's monitoring role is critical in project management, and "the commanding or directing role must be done, however euphemistically or surreptitiously" (Fells 2000, p. 347).

As far as the project constraints are concerned, they are represented by cultural differences and time.

At this stage, interdepartmental communication and collaboration play an essential role because performing these final steps involves various departments such as IT and Logistics, which are simultaneously performing their specific day-to-day tasks. However, in a team-based organisational culture, the stream of work runs smoothly, and no significant obstacles occur. This illustrates that if the “what” and “how” questions are clearly addressed and sustained by an appropriate organisational culture, barriers associated with project management can be overcome (Dealtry 2001).

Once all the pre-requisites have been ensured, the final stage of the project may be approached: the testing phase. Ideally, the project manager should run a simulation course in order to obtain a primary feedback on it. Simulation is the most effective learning method, and the project manager uses it in order to test the outcome and to discuss its impact upon the course participants. Consequently, the final clarifications and adjustments are made in connection to both the course contents and the teaching techniques.

In terms of communication tools, the process effectiveness is achieved by informal discussions which are preferred by high cooperation teams and have a positive impact on team members’ motivation and participation (Gent et al. 1998).

As far as the project evaluation is concerned, Tuckel and Rom (2001) argue that it is stated in terms

of meeting three basic objectives: time, budget, and quality. The first two criteria are easy to quantify or measure. As far as the quality condition is concerned, two assessment tools may be used: the course critique forms that the students fill in anonymously at the end of the course; the number of students that will maintain contact and develop professional projects with the project manager after the course completion, which may be considered as a token of their course satisfaction.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In order to assess the course’s contribution to the overall organisational performance, one should consider criteria such as staff motivation (who with?) and customers’/students’ satisfaction (who for?).

The former results from personal observation reveals a high level of morale, participation, communication, and collaboration, which represent the key success factors of the project presented in this paper. The latter is illustrated by the students’ comments and ratings carried out upon course completion.

Another determinant factor of the project success proves to be the constant focus on meeting and exceeding the students’ needs. This must be an essential element of the organisational culture and is widely regarded as a vital ingredient for achieving and sustaining competitive

advantage (Ma 2003).

As Tuckel and Rom (2001) state, there is a “desperate need to integrate project management tools and techniques with a broad customer driven process” (p. 401).

Consequently, the project examined in this paper is meant to be but the first step of an ongoing process of improvement and development based on the students’ feedback and the project manager’s experience and personal observation. One may view this aspect as a contradiction of the project defined as a “one-time activity”, but this paper argues that this initial perspective should be used as a foundation, and complemented by Cleland and Gareis’ (1994) approach, according to which projects must lead to improvement using limited resources as a sine-qua-non for maintaining competitive advantage. Given the present requirements and challenges that the cadets must face in various theatres of operations worldwide, the educational component must enjoy the military leaders’ full attention, accompanied by concrete steps towards continuous modernisation, flexibility, and adaptability.

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