

THE ROLE OF THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT WITHIN THE PROJECT ENVIRONMENT

Chapter 1: Introduction

In project management a project is defined as an endeavor undertaken to come up with a distinct or unique product or service in both public and private sectors. The discipline of project management has the sole aim of making sure that project resources are utilized both efficiently and effectively by planning and organizing these resources to make sure that project objectives are met in the best way possible and in the most measurable way. This is achieved by organization through the project planning process which distinctively involves processes such as project definition, development of objective statement, selection of planning teams, estimation and budgeting of resources required, risk planning and the eventual approval.

Successful project completion in any given organization is likely to be achieved through proper project management. However, Successful project completion is not easy as there may be inadequate resources to achieve the perceived project objectives and thus conflicts arise out of this. Conflict in real sense arises out of disagreements in opinions, interests, values and needs of the project team involved. Conflict in project management may be brought by factors such as conflicting project objectives and lack of adequate project definition notes Mitchell (2003).

Due to the fact that conflicts are likely to arise in the carrying out of any project either in the public or private sector there is dire need of the existence of a conflict management framework which is able to resolve the underling differences in opinions, interests, values and

needs. These conflicts need not only be solved objectively but also constructively and in a very timely manner so as to avoid ambiguities in the project and subsequent delays respectively.

The structure of a project management team is formulated in a way that it is encompassed by individuals who are able to work together and concentrate with the sole objective of efficient project delivery in the long run. At the epicenter of this project management team is the project manager. He or she is the leader of the project and should exercise all leadership skills to ensure that overall success of the project is achieved in the most effective way possible and in a timely manner.

One of the key responsibilities that this project manager will be charged with is conflict management. However, it is quite unfortunate that in many of the projects undertaken most of the managers are not keen to note the existence of conflicts due to ignorance, lack of experience and the domineering effects of lack of enough certification. It is therefore vital for any organization's project manager to be in a position to identify any existence of any conflict within the carrying out of the project.

Conflict identification in good enough time is very important as it enhances the solving of conflicts at the earliest time possible notes Mitchell (2003). The next step after identification is that the project manager should be able to assess the extent of the conflict so as to know what level of attention is needed. In this analysis of conflict behaviors is efficiently looked into. At this point the project manager should be in the best position to know the best means and ways to resolve these conflicts and to prevent them from occurring in the future. In a greater sense this helps in reducing the negative impact that these conflicts would have on the project level of performance and delivery.

A project manager should understand conflict. Conflict can be very healthy for an organization whether it is in the private or public sector. A conflict would be healthy if it is able to inculcate growth and development of individuals, if it is able to unearth pertinent issues that would have otherwise been left out or if it is able to bring out the best solution by pointing out the drawbacks or defects in the existing solution notes Mitchell (2003). Therefore critical analysis of the conflict at hand is very vital to ensure that the project delivery and success is achieved. The approach used by the project manager in assessing whether a conflict is constructive or deconstructive determines just how effective project performance and delivery will be achieved.

In a broader sense for any given organization effective conflict resolution and coherence of attitudes is of great importance to the specific stakeholders for the eventual goals to be achieved. The greatest concern in this part is how well, timely and adequately the underlying conflict is likely to be identified, assessed and resolved

In the current global situation there is an insurgence of conflicts due to factors such as business process reengineering, amalgamations and globalization which are part of the major current trends in business. This calls for greater attention as integration of business makes the whole issue of project management complex and diverse. A factor such as globalization has led to incorporation of different backgrounds and cultures and therefore different views of people due to respect of cultures and therefore the conflict management tool to be applied must be carefully selected notes Mitchell (2003).

The main objective of this thesis is to carefully and critically analyze the theoretical basis for the concept of 'conflict': to consider the types of conflicts the form it takes, approaches to

conflict resolution, consequences of conflict resolution to project delivery and success, to consider the mistakes done by managers or unavoidable aspects.

In a greater sense it is very vital to identify the causes of project failure and their underlying consequences. However the greatest concern in this thesis is the question ‘what role does ineffective conflict management play in lack of project delivery or project failure or what role does effective conflict management play in eventual project delivery and success?’

In a general view this paper aims at the analysis of the role played by conflict management within the eventual carrying out of the project, the direct impact to the delivery and success of the project, approaches to conflict resolution used by project managers and the assessment of project managers views on the importance of effective project management with direct comparison from previous researches carried out in the past by different professionals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review.

Different projects fail to succeed due to poor conflict resolution methods. This is because conflict resolution is geared at solving the problem at hand. “One key factor that project managers should consider is the conflict resolution model to use since there exists different models of approaches to conflict resolution in the project environment,” says Mitchell (2003). Otherwise if the wrong conflict resolution model is adopted project completion and eventual

delivery might not be very successful. In this regard adequate attention details the existence of a way that would suitably address the issue at hand. It also calls for proper analysis and detailed review. Basically at this phase it is vital for the manager to have a clear understanding of the ways to solve conflicts.

Generally, there are five ways to solve conflicts: forcing, smoothing, compromise, confrontation and withdrawal as illustrated by Mitchell (2003). Smoothing is a very important process as it involves accommodating and bridging the gap created in the conflict. This involves emphasizing on the areas that have absolute agreement. In this regard, managers will be geared on to concentrate on the areas that bring about minimum disagreement. In this context too smoothing as a process is also concerned with downplaying the areas that bring about constant disagreement and in this context the main question that project managers should ask themselves is what area is prone to disagreements.

This style is commonly applied in non-governmental organization. For example the food and agricultural organization has used this method to solve the problem of food crisis in developing countries. This is done by downplaying the politics involved by the political leaders of these countries. By this, food aid projects are run efficiently and effectively.

In any organization be it in the service or product industry or even in the private or public sector the issue of concern in this mode of smoothing should be when it can be most appropriate. Therefore the project manager should make sure that he or she identifies the most opportune time to apply smoothing notes Helderma (2005). Smoothing is most appropriate when: no complicated solution is involved, stakes are low, the liability of the parties involved is limited,

goodwill or harmony is the primary goal and when you want to waste no time in solving disagreements

Forcing is also another key concept applied in this model. Forcing involves a dominative way of conflict resolution in project management. Forcing generally applies competing and controlling as the key strategies Helderman (2005). It occurs when the dominating party ignores the needs or concerns of the project team and instead concentrates on what he or she thinks is right. Forcing is commonly applied in areas where it is a “do or die” situation for example in the case of medical practitioners whereby a patient is on the verge of death. It is also commonly applied when: stake is high and of vital important, relationship among individuals is not important and when a quick decision is to be made.

Most private sector heads apply this kind of style in order to reach their desired project goals. A good reference for this is federal bank agencies especially in the United States. A bank like city bank has used this style in rolling out its extensive branch networks. In this regard projects have been completed in a timely manner.

Avoiding comes about when withdrawal exists. This involves procrastination of the contentious issue for later attention or the eventual withdrawal from the issue. This is not in any way a permanent solution for any organization since the conflict will continue to reoccur. It is mostly used where there are no chances of winning, when stakes are low, when there is complete surety that the problem will not occur again and when in ones view maintenance of reputation is vital notes Mitchell (2003).

A good case reference whereby avoiding has been used in conflict resolution is development projects by religious organizations and charitable organizations. In this regard managers of these projects use this mode to avoid conflict as possible.

Compromising though seen as a competition oriented style of conflict resolution is also another style of conflict resolution. This is commonly referred as a give and take style. In this detailed analysis of the facts of the conflicting parties is tabled and they both bargain in order to come up with one common solution. Satisfaction is not the issue here. Due to existence of different conflicting scenarios this form of conflict resolution is commonly applied by managers whereby both parties have equal desire to win, when there is a complete deadlock, when the time frame is not sufficient, when stakes are moderate and where there is no gain if compromise is not reached.

Confrontation in project management is applies the concepts of integration and collaborating of key concepts. According to Kerzner (2009) this involves the adoption of a win-win style. In this case the conflicting parties meet and collaborate through problem solving and integration so as to reach a common agreement which would favors and restricts the principles upheld by both parties. Communication that is both open and direct is very vital in this style.

It most appropriate when both parties are entitled to win, when cost minimization is the goal, when there is trust and when there is enough time left. Perhaps one key feature to note of this style is that it significantly enhances learning of both parties.

The above style characterizes conflict resolution in three basic models namely interactive bargaining, interactive problem solving and distributive bargaining. Interactive bargaining is

applied in collaboration or confrontation and this has been applied in the railway project by companies such as LUL.

Interactive problem solving is applied in avoiding and compromising whereby problems are solved through interaction of conflicting parties in the project team. The project manager is faced with the responsibility of choosing the best course of action. One of the capital projects that is currently run by the BAA Company is Preparing for the A380 at Heathrow. With a very high stake of around £105 million (excluding the aircraft stands) means that high stakes were in question and therefore interactive bargaining would be one of the models that would be best suited to make sure that wrong courses of actions are not taken. This method would also be suitable as it involves major groups with a massive project team.

Distributive bargaining integrates the use of negotiations as its key element. In this model project teams explain the suitability of their propositions from which the final resolution is adopted. This is also known as claiming value unlike the integrative bargaining which aims at creating value. Lax and Sebenius claim that negotiations necessary include both integrative bargaining and distributive bargaining. Big companies such as BAA should apply this model as it yields higher results in conflict resolution although it results to delay in decision making and conflict resolution.

Game theory is also another model that is used in conflict resolution. In this model, that was developed by major game theorists such as A Raiffa and Alexander Morgestein there exist distinct number of players in the project team and they have different strategies on which to adopt. There exists a conflict especially where the payoffs of the different players are not equal. In this regard the multiobjective conflict that arises must be solved. There exist two kinds of

solutions which are the nonsymmetrical Nash solution or the Symmetrical Pareto solution. In the Pareto solution the pay offs are equal and therefore the conflict is resolved mutually and therefore no player benefits at the expense of the other.

The non Symmetrical solution is where the conflict is resolved at the expense of one of the players. In this regard the recommendations of one player are ignored. A good major reference to the application of game theory to solve project management conflicts is the case of application of game theory for a ground water conflict in Mexico and its application in the modeling of water management projects, listing and listing of endangered species as evidenced by Prato (2005).

One clear cross cutting feature of project management is the presence of distinct number of people. These people are known as the project team and their number determines the size of the project team in hand. Smaller project teams are easy to manage since their likely hood of existence of conflicts is minimal as compared to big project teams

Out of the presence of different group sizes it is important to consider the communication strategies to adopt in order to effectively and efficiently solve conflicts notes Mitchell (2003). The challenges of globalization contribute to these. Big project teams have the likely hood of having project teams that are drawn from extremely large cultural diversities. In this regard the style adopted for conflict resolution must be one that accommodates the specific needs of each and every individual in the project. Resolution of these intergroup conflicts in the carrying out of projects leads to workgroup effectiveness which in turns leads to project delivery and success illustrates Kerzner (2009).

At a closer look of group management and the corresponding group size, findings in quantitative research have evidently shown that big groups stand a higher chance of lack of coherent conflict resolution than small groups. This research also puts it across that the presence of intergroup conflicts reduces the effectiveness of the group in the project management process as a whole.

There is also prevalence in the type of conflicts which is another factor that affects conflict resolution by a project manager. In this regard identification of the effect likely to be impacted by a certain conflict is a key step in the choice of the style of conflict resolution and eventual management.

Major conflicts have a huge impact on the organization while in quantifiable terms minor conflicts have little or no impact on the organization as noted by Helderma (2005). Major conflicts are characterized by factors such as upholding of high stakes in hand, cause very big delays in project delivery and success and may lead to eventual collapse of the project at hand.

In this regard it is very important to identify the processes involved in the project and the likely hood of any domineering major conflict that would otherwise compromise the delivery and success of the project as noted by Kerzner (2009). Big companies like BUPA have instituted controls that detect and identify major conflicts before they impact negatively to the business since the health and insurance industry is a very sensitive.

A point to note is that major conflicts like the one experienced in Jubilee line Extension project can delay the project and lead to the eventual lack of completion of the project. However in this case the eventual course of the project was undertaken but it led to massive cost overruns and delay.

Though seen as a traditional approach to the issue of conflict management, scrutiny of employees through research methods such as questionnaires is very vital especially in most of the growing organization. This is because the manager is able to identify in advance areas that are likely to cause any conflicts and in this regard resolution of conflict in project management becomes easy.

Conflicts do have advantages in the project undertaking process. However, this is only achieved if the appropriate problem solving model is adopted. Success and delivery of projects calls for effective conflict resolution measures through proper project management notes

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