Challenges in Public Sector Operations: A Case Study in a UK County Council

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Abstract

Managing operations in the Public Sector is different from managing operations in the Private Sector due to the nature of stakeholders' involvement. This research work explores the case of county council operations in the UK. The administration team of the county council managed a large project that involved several different teams, and required management of operations by a number of managers operating at different levels. Managing operations in a Public Sector organization is a leadership responsibility. The aim of this work is to investigate the role of the operations manager in public sector organisations and to apply learning from previous projects to future projects.

Keywords: Public Sector, Public Sector Operations, Challenges in Public Sector

1. Introduction

A project is a 'temporary endeavour to create a unique product, service or result' (Project Management Institute, 2018), and project management is 'the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities' (Project Management Institute, 2018). This paper will look at project management and project-based learning in the Public Sector. In September 2017, the administration team in a County Council (XCC) were involved in a large project; a floor move that involved several different teams and required project management from several different level managers. This paper pays particular attention to the administration team and their manager. Having worked at this County Council for over two years, this paper has had access to the management team and their plans and has been able to analyse the management and leadership within. The paper will look at what went well with the move, what could have been improved, and how project-based learning can help develop future projects within the County Council.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Projects as a Learning Opportunity
Projects are potential personal learning opportunities for both the company involved, and the project participants (Smith & Dodds, 1997; Arthur et al, 2001; Aerts et al, 2017). Arthur et al (2001) developed a model on project-based learning (See Appendix A), the model is comprised of three parts; firstly, the inputs to the project from the past careers

of those participating in the project, these could be internal or external sources. These inputs flow into the second part of the model, 'The Project', and engage with the project-sponsoring company during the development of the project. Finally, the 'project participants and the project-sponsored company are seen as potential beneficiaries of project-based performance and learning outputs' (Arthur et al, 2017). The 'knowing-why' refers to an individual's 'values, motivation and identity', as well as their work-life balance. It is what the individual will be able to bring to the project team. 'Knowing-how' is a reflection of the individual's skills and expertise, this could be from their education, training or general work experience; it is the individual's capability to influence the project's outcomes. 'Knowing-whom' refers to the individual's network and contacts that can be drawn upon as resources to the project. All three of these parts are usually interconnected one way or another. The Project section of the model refers to culture, humans and social as being part of the company's non-financial capital and are also all connected to one another. Cultural capital refers to the beliefs and values of the project members, human capital refers to the knowledge available through the members of the project, and social capital refers to the resources available through the relationships of the members, whether internal or external. The final aspect of the model is how the project members take with them the knowledge, skills and everything they have learned with on to their next projects, thus completing the cycle. Arthur et al (2001) reviewed four case studies and looked at how the companies can use them as learning experiences. The paper shows the importance of projects in helping a company to develop its future projects through its project team and all that they bring with them.

Knowledge is managed by the people (Aerts et al, 2017), and is therefore 'treated as a tacit and individual concept', but when 'transferring the public-sector project teams from one project to another [it] allows for inter-project learning to take place'. However, while some organisations find it easy to establish what knowledge has been carried forward, such as improved team working skills, time management and working to deadlines, (Smith and Dodds, 1997); they also learnt to deal with 'real world' issues. They learnt not to have unrealistic expectation when collecting information and developed their negotiation and assertiveness skills. However, the research carried out by Aerts et al (2017) found that the organisations struggled to decide which aspects of the new knowledge should be kept, and which aspects of the traditional approach would be better to be unlearned, this is due to the fact that converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge was not a priority when the projects were taking place, as well as the fact that the corporate culture does not 'attribute much importance to the knowledge management and transfer' (Aerts et al, 2017), focussing more on the costs and benefits.

2.2 Qualities of an Effective Leader
A project manager is the bond that keeps the project together, and the selection of a project manager can be directly linked to the success or failure of a project (Steyn, 2008), therefore it is crucial that a Project Manager has the qualities required to be effective.

Project Managers need two types of credibility in order to be effective; technical and administrative (Meredith & Mantel, 2010). If the manager has good technical credibility, they are seen by the team to be a positive leader. They do not need high levels of expertise, but they should have a broad knowledge across several relevant fields that the project will rely on. The manager must also be able to hear any problems from the team and be able to deal with them effectively and knowledgably. In order to be administratively credible, the manager must be able to perform key administrative responsibilities with ease, and in

a timely fashion. They must ensure that the project is running to time, and that all the necessary equipment is available when and where it is required. The project manager must be able to make decisions in the best interest of the project and must use mature judgement and courage to do so consistently. Meredith and Mantel (2010) also believe that there are certain criteria that Project Managers must meet in order to be effective, such as having a strong technical background, being mature, being hard-nosed, their ability to keep the team happy, having worked in several different departments, and being on good terms with senior executives.

Leaders can fall in to one of two categories, either 'Firefighter' or 'Firelighter' (Barber & Warn, 2005). Where firelighters are proactive leaders who are able to anticipate events and in turn prevent future problems, and a firefighter becomes compelled to solve issues as they occur, not able to look into the future, and failing when too many issues arise that cannot be solved. Barber and Warn (2005) established a theoretical basis to help distinguish between firefighters and firelighters and came up with the firefighter-firelighter model (see Appendix B). The model 'presents a range of leadership styles' and is used to 'expand understanding of the importance of the firelighter role' (Barber & Warn, 2005). The model starts with Avoidant, which occurs when leaders become 'overextended', with lots of problems arising, which leads them to resort to avoiding the problems all together and avoid having to make any decisions with regards to the issues. The next level up is firefighter, this comprises of reactive actions by the leader, or 'management by exception'. The leaders' behaviour can be active or passive, with some leaders taking action only when problems are chronic, whereas others will actively look for deviations from the plan and react to these immediately. In contrast to the firefighter, the next level of firelighter uses a combination of 'maintenance and transformational leadership behaviours' (Barber & Warn, 2005), allowing them to proactively lead the project. The leader must be able to motivate and lead people in their day to day tasks, to help the maintenance of the project. A true firelighter will be able to 'clarify the tasks, delegate responsibilities, identify rewards for effort and attend to the personal needs of the team members' (Barber & Warn, 2005). Firelighters are able to 'stimulate their followers'. Applying the firefighter-firelighter model to Project Managers is important as it shows what qualities are needed in a Project Manager, as well as what to avoid doing as a Project Manager. A good Project Manager will be able to 'maintain commitment to shared outcomes, encourage reflection before action and coach others to achieve demanding objectives', whilst also 'interacting with a number of networks' (Barber & Warn, 2005). They must be an 'ambassador and represent the team to others' (Barber & Warn, 2005). The article concludes that there are two different types of leadership styles, and a Project Manager must not just focus on dealing with issues as they arise, but must be able to adapt to any issues, and look forward in order to predict where issues may arise in the future of the project; a Project Manager must be a firelighter in order to be most effective.

An effective leader will be also able to draw out the knowledge that their employees are unaware of (Smith and Dodds, 1997).

2.3 Communication
In order to be an effective leader, communication issues need to be solved (Zulch, 2014); this can be done by having a good knowledge of the leadership styles used by Project Managers. Communication is a very important aspect of leadership and for the successful completion of a project (Belzer, in Stevenson and Starkweather, 2009), 'leaders who do

not communicate well are not really leading at all' (Clutterbuck and Hirst, 2002), leaders need to 'lead through effective communication (Zulch, 2014). Arrogance, disorganisation, negativity, lack of trust and stubbornness can all lead to poor communication (Pacelli, 2015, in Zulch, 2014).

2.4 Leadership in the Public Sector

It has become harder for the public sector to deliver the results expected of them (Crawford & Helm, 2009). Shareholders now have more power than ever, and have high demands for 'accountability, transparency and the ability to implement strategy' (Crawford & Helm, 2009). The public-sector is under pressure to meet the stakeholders' demands to demonstrate what is required of them, and effective project management is promoted to try and improve the aforementioned issues. To implement these changes in project management requires investment, therefore, those in charge of project implementation are often called up to justify the investment and need to provide 'evidence of the value organizations recognise when project management is appropriately implemented' (Crawford & Helm, 2009). The scrutiny from the public, and their need for assurance has led to the importance of projects in the public sector to be recognised by government initiatives in several countries, including the UK. The Office of Government Commerce (OGC) was established to help governments 'deliver better value from its spending', including the 'delivery of projects on time, quality and cost, realising benefits' (Crawford & Helm, 2009). In the UK, there is 'encouragement and support for improved project management' (Crawford & Helm, 2009), and this is seen at various levels of the government. It is not just the UK where support is shown to the public sector, but also in the USA and Australia, where government backing has helped to raise awareness of the importance of projects in public sectors. Crawford and Helm (2009) used the issues found in their literature research as the basis for their own research in which they analysed four case studies of Australian government agencies. The themes that they looked for throughout were accountability and transparency, control and compliance, risk management, consistency in delivery, ensuring value for money, and stakeholder engagement. The findings from the case studies showed that all four organisations had the issue of staff shortages, and they all operate in 'complex multi-stakeholder environments requiring effective communication, consultation and responsiveness to the wider community', and they all worked in the 'political arena and are subject to the impact of ministerial requests on project work'. The findings of this paper are supportive of Thomas and Mullaly (2007, p.81), that 'investing in a particular form of project management provides a specific type of benefit in a specific context'. The results of their study showed that project management supports public-sector governance, and that the public-sector ethos is reflected in the dedication of the staff members and their commitment to serving the public. In the public sector, Project Managers may become 'embroiled in the ethics' (Meredith & Mantel, 2010), therefore the PMI Code of Ethics was created in 1982.

2.5. Importance of Employees during Projects

Project participants that are not part of usual project teams have a greater source of knowledge than they give themselves credit for, proving that they are a bigger asset to the team (Smith and Dodds, 1997). However, research has found that as these skills are learnt separately and are not directly linked to work or real-life situations, they can seem irrelevant to employees, leaving them feeling unable, or unmotivated, to apply them to their real work situations (Dannels, 2000; Maznevski & Distefano, 2000; Smith, 2003). The common theme found in the case studies of Crawford & Helm (2009) was that despite

the staff shortages, there was 'commitment and dedication of staff to their work and to a public service ethos'.

Title, Author and Year	Key findings	Propositions or Hypotheses
Developing Managers Through Project-Based Learning, Smith & Dodds (1997)	Using case studies from the public sector, managers can improve future projects by using the individuals and seeing their potential.	Both managers and team individuals can learn from previous projects
Learning to be professional, Dannels (2000)	Students are often taught technical and scientific disciplines necessary to succeed in the workplace, however find it difficult to integrate this learning in to professional situations.	The article looks at how academic and professional contexts are integrated in teaching.
Global leaders are team players: Developing global leaders through membership on global teams, Maznevski & DiStefano (2000)	Global development of leaders using mapping, bridging, and integrating.	Many techniques are used to develop the best leaders in organisations worldwide.
Project-Based Learning as the Interplay of Career and Company Non-Financial Capital, Arthur, DeFillippi and Jones (2001)	They developed the model on project-based learning, which shows how to get the best out of the project.	Projects are learning opportunities for both the individuals involved, and the company itself.
Project Management: Still more Art than Science, Belzer (2001)	The skills required for effective management are Communication; Organisational effectiveness; Leadership; Problem Solving and Decision-Making; Team Building; Flexibility & Creativity; and Trustworthiness.	Work environments are constantly changing, and managers must strive to stay up to date with them.
Leadership Communication; A status report, Clutterbuck & Hirst (2002)	Leaders must be effective in their self-awareness and be positive role models of communication in order to be effective in their jobs.	Leadership and Management share core competencies, with communication being the most important.
Workplace learning and flexible delivery. Review of Educational Research, Smith (2003)	Learners prefer to learn within a socially constructed context, rather than self-learning or independently.	Over the last ten years the interest in workplace learning has increased, with an emphasis on the social construction of workplace learning.

Leadership in project management: from firefighter to firelighter, Barber & Warn (2005)	Leaders are either firefighters or firelighters. They either only deal with each issue as it arises, and eventually become swamped under them, or they can see when potential issues will arise, and deal with them effectively.	In order to be an effective leader, you must be a firelighter: able to predict when issues will arise and deal with them effectively.
Government and governance: The value of project management in the public sector, Crawford & Helm (2009)	It is hard for the public sector to deliver what is required of them, especially with stakeholder power so high.	Staff commitment and their dedication helps the public sector to continue working to serve the public.
Project Management: A Managerial Approach, Meredith & Mantel (2010)	An effective project manager must be able to have a broad, but not necessarily in depth, knowledge of the whole project and aspects of it, they must also be able to perform key administrative responsibilities with ease.	An effective project manager must have both technical and administrative credibility.
Leadership Communication in Project Management, Zulch (2014)	Identified the characteristics required of a construction project manager. These characteristics indicate what type of leadership style the manager will use in the project.	A project manager that is trusted by their team will be able to communicate more effectively than those who do not. Communication is not just language, but includes attitude, behaviour and personality.
Knowledge transfers and project-based learning in large scale infrastructure development projects: and exploratory and comparative ex-post analysis, Aerts, Dooms & Haezendonck (2017)	Knowledge is managed by the people and inter-project learning occurred when a team moved from one project to another.	Companies should attribute more importance on the knowledge of its employees and learn from this knowledge and take this knowledge to the next project.

Table 3.1. Literature Review

3 Methodology

'It is useful to consider the full range of possibilities of data collection' (Creswell, 2013, pp16), so two questionnaires were created to collect primary data from XCC employees; one qualitative and one quantitative. As well as the questionnaires, other methods were used to collect data, such as focus groups, interviews, and the Delphi study; these were used to back up the data collected from the employees.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative questionnaires were used; using a 'mixed methods design should provide richer data than a mono method design' while also being

'more practical to undertake' (Saunders et al, 2016, p171). The questionnaires were distributed separately over two weeks to the employees currently working at XCC who were also employed during the floor move, which unfortunately meant that only ten employees were able to participate. Despite the small number, the results collected are still valid as they reflect the overall feelings towards the floor move and leadership, and data could only be collected from those present at the time of the move. The questionnaires were designed in relation to the leadership during the floor move in 2017 (See Appendix C), questions were asked about the floor move in general, while others were more specific to XCC leadership. Some questions in the quantitative questionnaire were taken directly from a XCC poster 'Leadership Expectations' (See Appendix D), this was added to see how the employees thought the leader met these expectations. The answers were closed, and presented in the Likert scale, which meant that they could be pre-coded, thus easier to analyse on the computer (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p246). As only ten employees completed the questionnaires, they were analysed using Excel (See Appendix E). The data for both was entered onto the computer. The quantitative data was then presented in appropriate graphs so that it was easy to determine any trends (Saunders et al, 2016, p498). The qualitative data was read carefully, with key words highlighted on the original sheets, and then inputted onto the computer and then tallied up (See Appendix E). The qualitative data was analysed using a deductive approach (Saunders et al, 2016, p569), where existing theory has been used to formulate the research.

Three focus groups were undertaken after the data from the questionnaires was collected and analysed. A focus group 'typically emphasises a specific theme or topic that is explored in depth' (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p512). The ten employees were split into random groups of four and three. The focus groups audio was recorded, as well as notes taken at the time. This was subsequently transcribed (See Appendix F), and key themes highlighted and analysed.

One face to face interview was completed with a manager, the interview was semi-structured with open questions, allowing for the respondent to open the discussion more than the questions alone would have allowed. The questions asked in the interview were reflective of the responses given by the employees in the questionnaires and focus group. The interview was recorded and transcribed to enable an easier analysis and comparison (See Appendix G).

Once all of the data had been collected, secondary Delphi study web research was used to back up the primary research conducted.

4   Analysis and Discussion

The research conducted concludes that the majority did not feel that the floor move went smoothly, however this does leave a lot of room to improve for the next project. The project will be reported back to the stakeholders in report form and a meeting. This information will be looked at before any similar projects are undertaken at XCC. This project was the first of its type at XCC, so unfortunately no information could be gathered to help this project, but this project will help others that take place in the future. Smith and Dodds (1997) discussed how 'real world issues' were dealt with during projects, and this was seen with issues in communication and being off schedule, for future projects employees should be used more efficiently, as they are one of the greatest assets of the team. This is similar to Aerts et al (2017); more importance should be attributed by the company to the employees, and a constant team should be involved in all projects. The

research found that the manager at XCC does have a broad range of knowledge of the area, however does not currently possess the technical and administrative qualities expected of leaders (Meredith & Mantel, 2010). The timing went off schedule on the day of the project, and the manager was unable to deal with this alteration, proving that the manger lacked the administrative credibility required of an effective manager (Meredith and Mantel, 2010). This could be achieved with the training that has been recommended by the employees. The lack of these skills could come from the fact that the manager comes from a different, non-managerial background.

The project was a learning opportunity for the management at XCC, as well as the company itself (Smith and Dodds, 1997; Arthur et al, 2001; Aerts et al, 2017). Unfortunately, the project did not make the most of the employees involved and their career capital inputs, but hopefully they were able to take away career capital outputs (Arthur et al, 2001). The project itself did lead to performance learning, and the manager has acknowledged what would occur differently next time they undertook a project like this.

Unfortunately, at the time of the project, the manager revealed themselves as more of a firefighter than a firelighter (Barber & Warn, 2005). They were not able to predict when issues would arise, such as teams being off of schedule, and could not deal with this effectively. In order to become a firelighter, the manager would have been able to adapt the plan and not feel compelled to follow the original plan so closely, even when it meant employees not being able to continue working.

The project had to be reported back to the stakeholders, proof that stakeholder power is high, especially in the public sector (Crawford & Helm, 2009). With all the budget cuts, the staff dedication at XCC has helped the public sector to continue to serve the public effectively, even at times of uncertainty and budget cuts.

The last six questions of the quantitative questionnaire were taken directly from XCC paperwork that defines what a leader should be, unfortunately, the answers given to these questions imply that the manager does not meet these requirements. XCC need to ensure that all of their managers are able to meet and exceed these expectations, and if they cannot they must provide relevant management training as otherwise it reflects poorly on XCC as a company.

5   Conclusion

Overall, the research is backed up by the literature looked at for this paper. It shows that communication needs to be effective in order for a project to be successful, it revealed the importance of the employees involved in the project, and how their knowledge could have helped to improve the project, what should happen the next time a similar project takes place and what knowledge should be carried forward and that projects are learning opportunities for all involved.

The research collected via quantitative and qualitative questionnaires, focus groups and interviews concluded that the project conducted at XCC was unsuccessful for several reasons. These reasons appear to have stemmed from deeper within the company and their training and general management and are not necessarily unique to the project. All managers within XCC should meet the requirements that are laid out in the 'Leadership

Expectations' poster (See Appendix D) that XCC have distributed, and if this is not the case training is required to help them reach these expectations.

From the research conducted and the literature reviewed, a framework has been drawn up around effective project leadership and what is required for a successful project (Fig. 5.1). This framework draws in all the aspects from the literature and research conducted that have been deemed ideal for a successful project to take place.
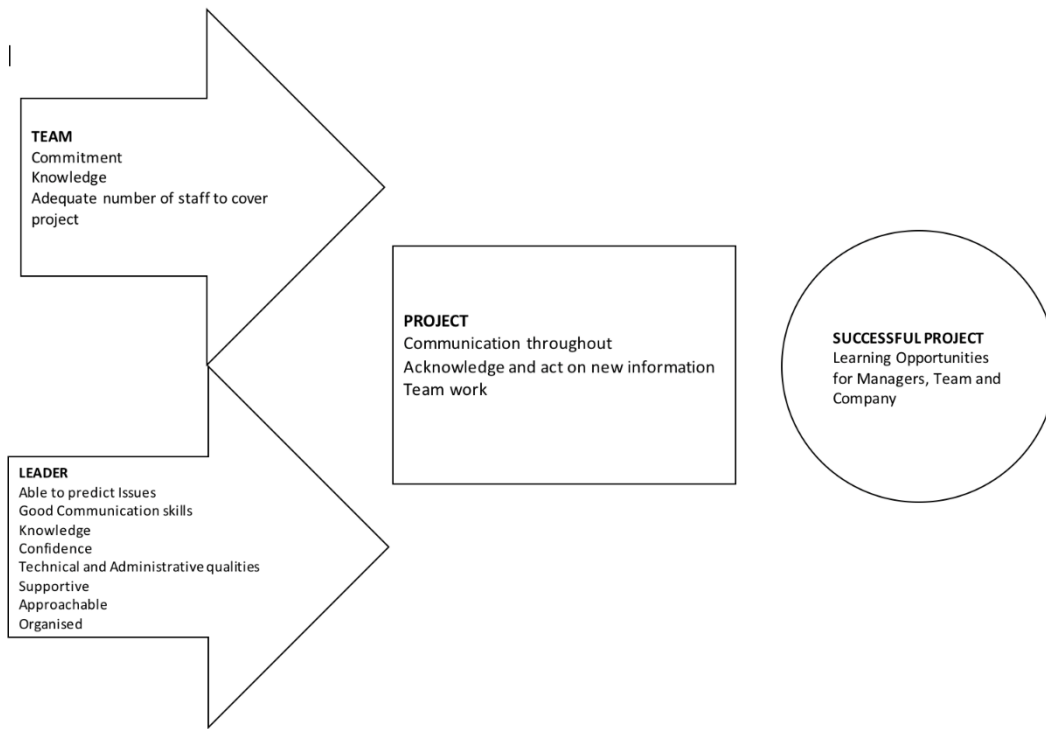

Fig. 5.1. Framework for successful project

The framework shows what ideally needs to go into a project, what ideally needs to occur during the project, and what can be taken away from a successful project. XCC should rely on this model when they undertake their next project.

The research concluded that in order to be an effective leader, there are many different qualities that a manager must have. The employees at XCC came up with the following qualities that are required of a good leader; communication skills; knowledge or intelligence; good people skills; approachable; organised; good listener; confident; motivational; and good at their job. A Web-based Delphi study was used to define the competencies and characteristics required of a Project Manager to be effective (Brill et al, 2006). This study identified that the top ten competencies required were; to know the goals of the project; to know the scope of the project; to conduct business ethically; to know the mission of the project; to know how project success is measured; to listen effectively; to share credit for success; to know available resources; to have strong communication skills; and to be able to recognise a problem (Brill et al, 2006). There are some similarities in the two studies, but it is obvious that the Delphi study has been answered by professionals and the research for this paper have been answered using real world scenarios by a team that are not a project team. XCC should take the professional

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opinions into account when developing future managers and leaders, especially those involved in projects.

Leadership in projects and project-based learning is clearly an important subject based on the amount of literature already available on it. The literature selected to be reviewed in the paper was chosen as it discussed matters relating to the key aims of the paper. This literature helped to form a basis for the research to be conducted.

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