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Stakeholder Engagement and Emotional Intelligence

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project design and development

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maintain relationships between fund-seeking and recipient organizations
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Abstract

In an ever-changing projects ecosystem, it has become increasingly
important to redefine the future roles of grant professionals as frontline
catalysts for grant project success. Good grants managers must aspire to
be good project managers in their ways of working if projects are to be
designed for success and implemented successfully. The call for a
synchronized execution underscores the need for grant managers to
cultivate and adapt new skill sets, exceeding traditional roles to emerge
as multifaceted leaders. At any given time in a grant's lifecycle, grant
managers are interacting with internal or external stakeholders, and they
must therefore unleash some project management skills to engage and
manage those stakeholders. To do this successfully, they must apply
emotional intelligence as a key ingredient to navigate and communicate
as effective leaders in the grants space. These two pillars highlight part of
a fusion dimension for project and grant management that will play a
pivotal role in shaping the future of grant management practices.

Introduction

In the realm of grant projects, the landscape is continually evolving,
presenting a myriad of challenges and opportunities. Synchronized
execution of grant projects is indispensable for navigating this dynamic
environment successfully. In addition to administrative documentation and
systems interaction, grant managers engage with people who play
different roles in projects, from design to close out. They must, therefore,
embrace new strategies to help them contribute to successful project
design and implementation as they consistently and deliberately enhance
their skill sets to catalyze success in donor funded projects as part of their
interest.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging stakeholders is a critical aspect of managing projects (Elly 2023). Stakeholders are individuals or groups (e.g., civil societies, communities, employees, host governments and others) whose interests are directly impacted by the project's outcomes. Pirozzi (2019) argues that “stakeholders are persons” (p. 1). Historically, stakeholders were holders of all the bets that were placed on a game in England (Pirozzi 2019). Marshall (2018) opined that these stakeholders may be internal or external to the organization and contest the nature of engagement through their perceptions, and what they value and prioritize in the project's proceedings. Every organization therefore aims to present several benefits to match these diverse stakeholders' interests, as noted within the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984).

Grant managers' roles involve managing subrecipients who implement projects on behalf, or manage awards as prime recipients. They are entrusted with managing stakeholders and processes within the grant's lifecycle, from project design to close out. The stakeholder theory underscores the importance of recognizing and understanding the expectations and needs of various stakeholders. Grant managers must actively use project management skills to get all stakeholders involved. According to Elly (2023), there exists a correlation between stakeholder involvement and project success which is indicative of a significant impact; a unit change in stakeholder involvement can lead to a 7.5% increase in project success. A disregard in stakeholder involvement can be detrimental to project success, regardless as to whether a project is private sector driven or for the benefit of a community through not-for-profit initiatives. For example, the case study of the Apple Lisa project illustrates the company's ambitious endeavor to introduce a graphical user interface (GUI) computer, ultimately resulting in significant failure despite initial promises of innovative features such as the mouse and high-performance processor. Stakeholders balked at the computer's high price, insufficient software, and unreliability. Its failure underscored the critical importance of effective stakeholder communication and transparency in managing expectations and aligning deliverables with market demands. Prioritizing stakeholder involvement can mitigate the risk of overpromising and under-delivering, thus ensuring better outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction.

In the context of donor-funded projects and particularly in developing countries, effective stakeholder engagement and management is crucial for project success and sustainability. However, numerous community development organizations fail to engage them in decision-making processes while they possess valuable insights that can contribute to the design, implementation, review, and assessment of development projects (Wanjue 2023). Adopting a participatory approach, such as the ladder of citizen participation proposed by Arnstein (1969), can provide a framework for meaningful stakeholder engagement. This approach emphasizes the importance of empowering stakeholders and ensuring their active involvement in decision-making processes. Gonzalez (2019) agrees with this approach through the *spectrum of community engagement to ownership tool* which delineates five key developmental stages of engaging communities: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Defer to.

Engaging community members in development endeavors cultivates trust and fosters a sense of ownership within the community, thereby enhancing project longevity. Stakeholder engagement has the potential to facilitate favorable social transformations by promoting resilient, effective, and enduring community development, resulting in cost savings for organizations, heightened project effectiveness and influence, poverty reduction, and overall improvement in the livelihoods and well-being of community members (Wanjue, 2023). It is in the interest of grant managers for the entire granting process to integrate seamlessly, from design, writing and managing and telling the story, because funders rely on success for scaling. Wanjue (2023) writes:

One must get down to the lowest local levels and not bring community members out of their village to discuss project activities to ensure their participation and contribution in all aspects of the project cycle (needs identification, budgeting, implementation, and impact assessment) (p. 90).

Elly (2023) recommends project managers be proactive in identifying key stakeholders, documenting their expectations, conducting thorough stakeholder analyses, and prioritizing stakeholder involvement throughout the project lifecycle for higher chances of project success. However, grant managers must not work in isolation to complete this process. They must be ready to learn, adopt, and employ interactive strategies with stakeholders that are guided by emotionally intelligent skills in the grant metamorphosis.

Recommended strategies for promoting stakeholder involvement in projects include the following.

1: Foster Stakeholder Engagement

- Ensure active participation via regular communication and feedback loops.
- Organize periodic meetings and align stakeholder expectations.

2: Establish Effective Communication Channels

- Develop a communication plan detailing channels, frequency, and protocols.
- Utilize automation tools for streamlined communication and team updates.
- Encourage an open-door policy to discuss concerns and maintain project clarity.

3: Prioritize Transparency and Accountability

- Cultivate transparency by addressing challenges openly.
- Engage stakeholders, including sponsors and customers, in decision-making processes.
- Foster trust by promptly communicating deviations and seeking collaborative solutions.

4: Define and Manage Project Scope

- Ensure stakeholder alignment on project scope before initiation.
- Develop a detailed scope statement with deliverables, timelines, and acceptance criteria.
- Implement change control mechanisms to mitigate scope creep and maintain focus.

5: Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for team members and stakeholders.
- Define accountability structures for effective oversight.
- Regularly review roles to maintain alignment and accountability.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in effective leadership, influencing how leaders understand and manage their own emotions and those of others within the organization (Saha et al., 2023). Recent literature underscores the significance of EQ in leadership and team performance (Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Coronado-Maldonado, 2023). Studies reveal that emotionally intelligent leaders not only enhance organizational behaviors, but also drive business results and growth, fostering positive attitudes among team members. It has never been as important for grant managers to apply emotional intelligence skills as it is now. The future of good grant managers will be for those who are good project managers and emotionally intelligent because they will drive strategic decisions through their leadership influence in grant making as they interact with diverse stakeholders.

EQ encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Mental Health America, N.D.). Leaders with high EQ can recognize their own emotions, understand their impact on behavior, and empathize with the emotions of others.

Grant managers are often involved in leading teams, navigating complex relationships, making strategic funding decisions, and addressing diverse stakeholder needs. Emotional intelligence emerges as a critical asset for grant makers, grant writers and grant project managers because they are the centerpiece of the grant's management lifecycle. For example, results by Bocoum's (2010) study on leadership indicated that leadership style in nonprofit organizations did not significantly impact funds raised, while overall emotional intelligence did. The study findings suggest the need for enhancing emotional intelligence among nonprofit peers, especially in fundraising for grant writers. Grant managers and writers play a pivotal leadership role in the grant's life cycle, from understanding stakeholder needs to communicating them and managing relationships thorough the project period. It is essential that they lead with all attributes which mirror emotionally intelligent leaders.

Grant managers with high EQ can empathize with grant applicants, identify underlying concerns, and provide personalized assistance, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful grant outcomes. Equally, grants managers ought to empathetically communicate as this is paramount in grant management (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). Grant writers specifically need to possess the ability to express ideas clearly, provide constructive feedback, and resolve conflicts diplomatically.

By leveraging EQ to enhance communication skills, grant managers can facilitate effective collaboration and mitigate misunderstandings among stakeholders. They must also deliberately and effectively manage relationships as this is essential for successful grant management (Goleman, 1995). High EQ enables them to navigate these relationships with empathy, understanding, and diplomacy, fostering collaboration and trust. As they make decisions, it is imperative that such decisions are sound (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). EQ enables grant managers to remain objective, manage emotions, and consider diverse perspectives during decision-making processes. These EQ attributes are key ingredients to the future of grant making, management, and overall project success.

Key strategies for improving EQ skills for grant managers include the following.

1. **Take Time to reflect:** Grant leaders should stop and think about their feelings before they react quickly. This helps them control their emotions and make smart decisions.
2. **Know Thyself:** Grant leaders should figure out what they are good at and what they need to work on. It is important to be humble and open to feedback so you can grow personally. This is very important in a Prime-Subaward relationship. Listen to your subgrantees.
3. **Understand Others:** Grant leaders should learn to understand how others feel by paying attention to their body language and considering different points of view. Good communication builds trust and strengthens relationships.
4. **Communicate effectively:** Grant leaders should learn to communicate clearly, listen actively, and adjust their message depending on who they are talking to. It is important to be clear and pay attention when talking to others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the synchronized design and execution of grant projects requires deliberate stakeholder engagement and application of emotional intelligence for success. Grant managers must evolve into visionary leaders who transcend traditional roles and move away from their authenticity paradox (Ibarra 2015) to championing stakeholder engagement, and apply emotional intelligence in team building and management in their day-to-day roles as they advance grant making. By embracing these approaches, grant managers can navigate the challenges of grant cycle management by effectively positioning themselves as catalysts for positive change while shaping the future of grant management. Empowering grant managers is not merely a strategic imperative, but also a moral imperative, ensuring that grant projects fulfill their potential to drive sustainable development and social impact.

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