

# CULTURAL ISSUES THAT INFLUENCE IMPLEMENTATION IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*This report would investigate conflicts that arise due to cultural issues whilst implementing project management within public service. Verma 1997 described culture as the distinctive way in which a group of people related by geography, religion, ethnicity, or some other unifying principles to lead their lives. This lead to the common understanding of shared set of values, beliefs, attitudes and knowledge and it is the evolution that stretches from generations to generations. For a facility to have a successful economic lifelong or functional life, people from different cultural background should team up and be able to utilise this facility without objecting other people from different cultural background.*

*A study regarding the current implementation of project management in Limpopo Department of Public Works was done. The study involved mostly problematic areas which included Vhembe District (former Venda), Bothabelo District (former Bushbuckridge), and Waterberg District. The reason for the study was to establish why some contractors do not complete projects in time and why labourers on site kill others. The study found that the main problem was due to cultural differences.*

**Key words:** Social Compact, Batho Pele Belief Set, Integrated Project Team, Project Management, Corporate Culture

## INTRODUCTION

Culture is the way in which the group of people led their lives associated by geography, religion, ethnicity, or some other unifying principles. Culture can be diversified in terms of work habits or attitudes, language, aesthetics, education, religion, beliefs, social organizations, and political life. It must be noted that cultural differences could influence the success or failure of a project. This could result in terms of negotiations on international projects.

This paper will firstly discuss about corporate culture, cultural diversity, project management in general, social compact agreement, an integrated project team, Batho Pele Belief Set, improved service delivery and finally, customer satisfaction. Conclusions will be drawn based on the discussions from the topics highlighted above.

## FINDINGS

### What is Culture

Culture has different meanings. For example, Henry van Dyke cited in Stevenson described culture as “*the habit of being pleased with the best and knowing why*”. Henry Ward Beecher cited in Correct Quotes defined culture as the “*true culture which helps us to work for social betterment of all*”. This means that professionals to suite the current environment could construct or learn culture at that specific time. For instance, a child cries for food due to phychological characteristics determined within human genetic codes. An adult could learn to eat cereals and milk due to morning hunger.

This indicated that culture could be crafted from the way people behave and could be adopted from generations. (<http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html>)

This document would discuss culture in an organisation (corporate culture) in terms of providing services to our customers out there. This is further explained in the section that follows hereunder.

### Corporate Culture

There is currently misunderstanding about cultural differences in construction sites in Limpopo province. For example, Limpopo province has different spoken languages that include Sotho speaking, Venda speaking, Ndebele speaking, Tsonga speaking, English speaking and Afrikaans speaking people. There are many organisations in villages within which the department operates and this include Community Based Organisations (CBOs), NGOs, Student Governing Bodies (SGBs), and other stakeholders that include

Traditional Leaders, Municipalities, etc with whom we interact. For instance, Traditional authorities and the municipalities are sometimes not agreeing in terms of the ownership of land. Verma 1997 argues that project managers must be on alert to learn from people of diverse cultures. Project managers must also act as catalyst to achieve synergy in multicultural project. Synergy is the working together towards a common goal by joint or cooperative actions from a diverse mix of people (Verma, 1997).

Currently, Limpopo Provincial Government has undergone the transformation process. Transformation process occurred due to the high number of people employed by the three former governments, which is former Gazankulu Government, Venda Government and Lebowa Government who could not be integrated into the new government. However, different cultural groups (Tsonga speaking, Venda Speaking, and Sotho Speaking) have started to learn from each other and start to implement team spirit in the implementation of project management system.

Culture is a subset of human resources, and it forms part of the PMBOK knowledge areas. Project managers must develop project management strategies to facilitate open communication, effective teamwork and leadership style that inspire high performance of all project participants throughout the project life style (Verma, 1997). Project managers must appreciate major cultural elements affecting projects, which includes *material culture, language, aesthetics, education, religion belief and attitudes, social organizations and political life*. People understand that they are different but it is a duty and responsibility of a project manager to focus on getting things done rather trying to teach people their values and work styles. A key in project management is listening skills which project managers must focus on because is a tool for creating teamwork and must be conscious about their behaviour, attitude and feeling, and feel completely responsible for how they affect others (Verma, 1997).

### **Cultural Diversity**

People understands that they are different but they have one thing in common, that is, common understand about a project and must have common objectives on the project. The most central issue about cultural diversity is communication. Communication will highlight the scope, time frame, risk associated to the project, and the required quality to be achieved after completion.

Project managers should understand and learn from people of different cultural background. Culture should be understood in terms of attitude towards life, attitude towards an organisation, individualism or collective efforts towards a project and finally, a long-term or short-term duration on the existence of culture on the particular projects.

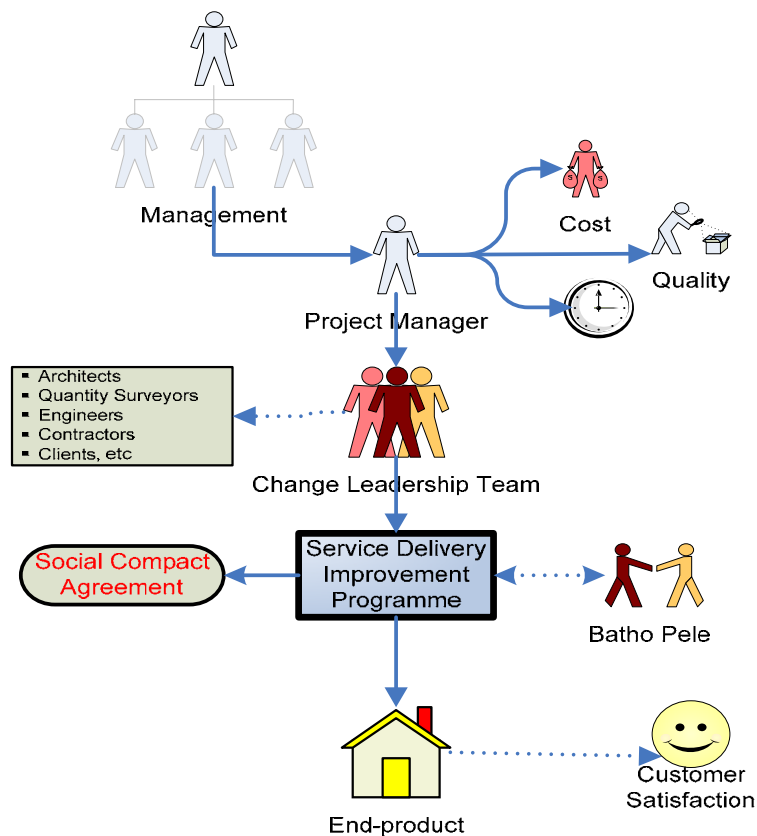
## **PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

According to PMBOK (2000), project management has been defined as the “application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements. Project management is accomplished through the use of the processes such as: initiating, planning, executing, controlling, and closing”. It involves the competing demands for scope, time, cost, risk and quality for the projects to be managed by the project team.

However, within Limpopo provincial government, there are various cultural groups of people who are working in a project environment. These groups all have the common understanding of project management within building environment. The department has finally managed to form a good corporate team from restructuring process. According to Verma (1997:63), a team is a “*group of people who are committed to common goals, who depend on each other to do their job (work interdependently), and who produce high quality results*”. This team could be formed from people of different cultural groups.

### **Project Manager**

A project manager is an official who manages a project from initial stage to completion and is mainly focusing on completion within cost, within the required quality and within time. A project manager must be a single point of accountability in such a way that he or she manages diversity of professionals from different cultural background. This project manager therefore takes initiatives by bringing everybody together and makes some commitments of achieving common goals already set at the beginning of the project as shown in figure 1 below. This therefore leads to the establishment of a Social Compact Agreement which is discussed in the following section.



*Figure 1 Project Manager's Role and responsibility*

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the processes of implementing project management in a complex environment especially where different cultural groups are living. This could also happen where a multinational company is managing projects outside the South African borders.

## **SOCIAL COMPACT AGREEMENT**

According to ACT Government (2004), a social compact is defined as an agreement drawn and signed that sets out an understanding about the relationship between the government, private sector and the community sector. "The social compact agreement sets out an understanding that each sector is committed to in working together for the public good. It is also intended to promote mutual understanding and guide community sector and government representatives to adopt processes and behaviour that value the role, contribution, perspectives and expertise of both parties".

A system of working around problem solving construction related problems on sites is not there although project managers could work around that. To formalise this current trial and error method, the Australian method of formulating a Social Compact Agreement seems to be more viable. The Social Compact would be used in four main ways as set out in ACT Government 2004:

- ✚ To build common understandings and improve dialogue;
- ✚ As a guide to the way communication and processes are managed by each sector, and to behaviour in the relationship;
- ✚ As a means of drawing attention to and resolving problems in the relationship; and
- ✚ As a basis for evaluation and improving how relationship is working.

This indicates that the implementation of a Social Compact Agreement is an integrated process of working together towards achieving the common objectives. The government cannot work in isolation to the community sector, private sector and vice versa.

Problems are mostly experienced at the implementation stage. This is where different stakeholders like traditional chiefs, ward councillors, municipalities and end-users do not agree about the implementation of a project. The reason why these problems are happening is the following shortcomings at the planning stage. These include the following:

- ✚ Integrated development planning;
- ✚ Electricity supply (Eskom);
- ✚ Water supply (Water Affairs);
- ✚ Approved plans (Local Government);
- ✚ Sanitation (Environmental Affairs);
- ✚ Environmental Assessment Impact Report (Environmental Affairs); and
- ✚ Access roads (Limpopo Roads Agency).

With the initiatives from a project manager for signing a social compact agreement, different stakeholders involved at an early planning stage where everybody give inputs in terms of the provision of such a service is needed. Communities must be well informed before projects happen in their areas of living. The reason is to avoid misunderstandings between different stakeholders regarding these projects. It must be remembered that communities do not want or rely on assumptions. To achieve the objectives of social compact agreement, there should be an integrated project team.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INTEGRATED PROJECT TEAM

The integrated project team is a team which is interdependent between project team members. Their satisfaction and pleasure is derived from their association with the team based on their unique characteristics of an integrated project team. According to Verma (1997:66), some of the important characteristics of a fully integrated project team are:

- ✚ A common reason for working together
- ✚ Strong sense of belonging
- ✚ Pride and enjoyment in group activity
- ✚ Interdependency
- ✚ Shared interests
- ✚ Commitment to the team concept
- ✚ Strong performance norms and results orientation
- ✚ Acceptance of group accountability for success and failure
- ✚ High degree of intragroup interaction
- ✚ Respect for individual differences
- ✚ Climate of trust and healthy conflict

Based on the characteristics identified above, a project manager is a manager who is a single point of responsibility or accountability and should be a key manager who manages diversity of different stakeholders irrespective of cultural background. An integrated project team should also focus on Batho Pele Belief Set in terms of providing services to end users as discussed hereunder.

## BATHO PELE BELIEF SET

Batho Pele Belief Set is derived from Batho Pele Principles, which are all about the following:

- ✚ Consultation
- ✚ Service Standards
- ✚ Access
- ✚ Courtesy
- ✚ Information
- ✚ Openness and transparency
- ✚ Redress
- ✚ Value for Money

According to DPSA (2005), a project manager needs to concentrate on a *customer first* principle irrespective of culture, gender and colour of skin. A new vision of *Batho Pele Belief Set* is derived from Batho Pele Principles and it is as follows: We Belong, We Care, and We Serve. The reason for introducing this cultural change is as follows:

- ✚ Improve Integrated Quality Service Delivery Sustainable
- ✚ Re-orientate the character of the Public Service

## IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY PROGRAMME

In terms of creating a good project team, project managers could improve service delivery when an integrated planning at inception of projects is done. The reason is that there won't be any delay in terms of delivery period because a particular project should be done after proper feasibility study has been done. For instance, a clinic should be built where electricity grid has been installed and where access roads were built.

### Customer Satisfaction

Client satisfaction is only achieved when proper homework in terms of assessing the possible problems and feasibility studies has been done. The customer is not interested on hearing problems on site but is interested on the finished product. It is the result of hard work of a project manager that should have brought all stakeholders together in the form of signing a social compact agreement, which stipulates conditions of possible site related problems before any project starts.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings discussed above, the following conclusions are made.

- ✚ Successful implementation of cultural issues in project management: It was discussed that to successfully manage projects, a project manager needs to have full project management understanding and knowledge. A project manager needs to focus and be responsible for preparing and maintaining the project plan, organise the project and to manage the whole project from inception to completion. The implementation of Social Compact Agreement is another way of eliminating misunderstanding on site as well as reducing the level of conflicts on site irrespective of cultural differences on the projects. This could lead to the customer or client satisfaction on a project after completion.
- ✚ Batho Pele principles and the Belief Set will help strengthen the successful implementation of project management irrespective of different cultural background.
- ✚ Failures could also arise due to poor planning on the project manager's side: This could arise due to huge workloads on the project manager where he or she is unable to plan and is suitable to bring all the stakeholders together and sign a Social Compact Agreement as already discussed. It would on the other hand result in poor service delivery, which would result in budget overrun and late completion of projects due to strikes or labour unrest on sites and other funny things that happen on site.
- ✚ The way forward on cultural issues that influence the implementation of project management includes constant monitoring of tools and constant progress reviews periodically. This would lead to effective project management by a project manager to checks and balances on a project.

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