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LESSONS IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

by

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PREFACE

The initial idea for a summary paper on project management came from W. Haven North, the Associate Assistant Administrator of AID's Evaluation Division in the Bureau of Policy, Planning and Coordination. Mr. North was responding to a request by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to summarize project management lessons emerging from evaluations and other sources. The attached summary paper will be included in the DAC Evaluation Group report for the April 1984 DAC meeting. Mr. North recently noted in personal correspondence that "...what made this report particularly attractive to my counterparts and the DAC Secretariat was that it reflected conclusions based on research and evaluation findings. These were identified in the paper...and give it considerably more authority than one usually has in such summaries."

The author, Louise G. White, is a Professor at George Mason University. Substantive and contractual guidance for the paper was provided by Marcus Ingle of the International Development Management Center at the University of Maryland, College Park. Morris Solomon of the Development Project Management Center in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Jeanne North in the Office of Rural and Institutional Development in the U.S. Agency for International Development contributed valuable editorial suggestions.

The paper will be amplified in the future and published as part of the DPMC/IDMC publication series.

LESSONS IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

I. INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS.

There are two initial questions: First, what is the meaning of development project management; and second, what constitutes acceptable evidence that a particular management practice is successful?

This discussion assumes that development involves a concern for the poor and for equitable growth, for participation by the public, for increasing the capacity of Third World institutions to bring about development, and relies on both public and private sector initiatives (51). A project is a discrete activity that can be separately designed, approved and implemented. Management refers to the effort to direct project activities to accomplish development goals within the severe constraints and scarce resources that exist in Third World nations (12,19,51).

In relation to acceptable evidence, there has been limited systematic research or testing of project management innovations (10,22,60). The evidence exists in the form of case studies, some evaluations, theoretical arguments, and professional observations contained in workshop reports and field reviews (5,13,23,25,45,51,55,59,60). In spite of the lack of rigor, however, there is a fairly consistent body of evidence that supports the following general principles of project management:

II. KEY LESSONS OF EXPERIENCES IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

A. Development projects need to be responsive to the socio-economic-political conditions of their external and internal environments.

The environment has a significant impact on projects, and managers need to find ways to take it into account and influence it (7,10,12,45,51,54). One way is to build links with relevant organizations and political groups. Such links can expand the resources available to a project manager, can prevent others from subverting a project's goals, and may increase the chances that its results will continue beyond the life of the project (7,14b,29,54). National elites are part of that environment; several cases suggest that projects need support in high places (16,18,45,51). Donors are another part of that environment; the problem is that their expectations can overburden host country institutions (51).

B. All those who have a stake in a project, including LDCs, donors, contractors, and beneficiary groups, need to be involved and to have substantial influence throughout the project's activities.

Project management should be a collaborative process (11,16,59) and include major stakeholders and beneficiaries in its design (7,12,23,45), implementation (31,34) and evaluation (5,7,63). Some add that potentially conflicting interests should also be represented (4,40,41,62). Projects are more likely to achieve goals if local expertise and knowledge are included (1,7,30), and if local groups agree on the problem and feel positive about projected changes (23).

The involvement of beneficiaries can improve the management of a project: it enables managers to draw on the public's expertise, to gain their cooperation, to insure that different interests are included, to elicit contributions, and to encourage beneficiaries to assist in maintenance activities (4,30,41,61).

To encourage participation and make it productive: keep projects simple and small (57); develop teams that include several groups of stakeholders (13,59); use existing organizations (17b,30); target benefits to specific groups (57); require contributions (16,42); emphasize tangible benefits (4,57); plan ways to

share risks (9,30,34,35,41,65); give local associations responsibility for tasks such as contracting for construction work (60); design special training for local groups to introduce new ideas, and to help them plan maintenance and financial contributions (1).

C. Project management is most successful when it is designed as a learning process.

Many projects follow a blue print approach in which pre established goals determine what is done (30,32,42,45). In a learning process goals are set and then adjusted on the basis of experience (12,22,41,30,50,55,59,64). Instead of thinking of a project as a series of separate stages, planning and implementation and evaluation are integrated and learning and change occur throughout the process. Using this approach project managers can respond most effectively to their environments, and can insure that techniques borrowed from western experience and priorities set by donors will be adapted to local circumstances (3,28,43,51,52,59). In a learning process, projects become experiments that in turn can be "learned from" to develop broader programs (1,30,33,45,48,51).

"Learning" approaches can create problems for donors who often need to know the details of what they are funding ahead of time (51,26).

D. Projects can be most effectively designed and implemented by means of a team process.

Successful project management depends on getting organizational members to reflect on policy goals and performance (27,36,28). This is best done by building a team of local personnel and external consultants, and focusing on the task at hand. Projects facilitate team building because they are designed around specific tasks that a team can easily focus on.

In a team members practice ways of communicating with each other in order to diagnose problems in their organization, clarify and agree on their goals (16) and design specific tasks and projects (19,20,22,24,25,26,27,33,51,55,60). (Variously called learning networks, working groups, action-training, performance intervention, action research, guidance system). The team should include top management and also personnel at various levels in the organization in order to tap their expertise and gain their commitment (12,13). Team should also be multidisciplinary (7). Potential problems with a team approach: team building can bypass larger political issues and limit the agenda to those problems identified by the group (51); and extra effort is required to fully integrate them into the organization due to their temporary nature.

E. Training in project management is most effective when it is planned and conducted to improve performance on a particular project and when it emphasizes organizational capacity rather than individual skills per se.

Plan the training jointly with those being trained, and relate it to the actual tasks of the program (12,13,51,59,36). Successful training programs have clear goals and objectives, are offered to teams of individuals, help them accomplish a particular task, focus on learning-by-doing, and are adapted to the situation (25). Such tailored training is costly but also more effective. In some cases packaged training materials on generic skills can be used, but only if they are adapted to the actual project tasks (36).

Make training part of an expanded personnel system by linking it with career development plans and establishing rewards that take training and performance into account (36,43,46).

F. Data collection procedures and evaluation plans should be designed to be useful to managers in improving the performance of the project and in informing stakeholders about its results.

Monitoring and evaluation should be designed in collaboration with managers. The relevant questions are what information will be useful to them in improving their performance and the results of the project, and how can it be provided to them on a continuing and timely basis? (5,26,37,44,63) Include beneficiaries in designing data collection, since they are often the best sources of performance data (7,5,63). It is also important to collect information on the costs of achieving the results so that managers will be sensitive to efficiency and cost effectiveness. Finally, in order to encourage learning it can be useful to collect information on the actual process of project design and implementation (program or process documentation) (49,61).

Methods of data collection should also be appropriate to the project. Indicators and measures should be simple and easily gathered (9,11,17,18); should focus on actual behavior rather than more remote macro conditions (6); should include both quantitative measures and qualitative judgements and observations (5,63). New technologies like microcomputers are beginning to show promise for reducing the costs of information processing, which should make it more feasible to collect and report information in a timely manner (25b).

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR DONORS AND LDC'S

A. Implications for LDCs: LDC institutions will need to be strengthened in order to carry out development projects

Since development includes a concern for enhancing the capacity of institutions to carry out development tasks, most argue that projects should be assigned to existing institutions, rather than build new ones. In most cases this choice requires strengthening or even reorienting the institutions (1,7,8,16,26,30,33,41,45,47,55,59,64). Host personnel will need to alter traditional management policies in so far as they follow a blueprint rather than a learning process approach. This means designing incentives to reward and encourage project results that are consistent with the goals of development. Specifically, financial policies and procedures, criteria for choosing projects, personnel policies, training programs will all need to be reoriented to reflect the lessons described above. The evidence is that while this is often difficult, it is possible, and has been done in a wide variety of situations (1,7,14,22,24,27,30,34,38,45,49).

B. Implications for Donors: In order to encourage LDC institutions to make the necessary changes donors will need to change many of their own policies and procedures and will need to provide technical assistance that is appropriate rather than counterproductive.

Donors often specify procedures that require host country institutions to follow a blueprint rather than a learning process approach. Thus they will need to change their own procedures in order to encourage LDC institutions to be responsive to their environments, and involve a wide range of stakeholders and beneficiaries in project design and implementation. They will need to establish incentives to reward team building, task oriented training, and results oriented data gathering and evaluation (11,12,13,32).

Donors also have to provide high quality and appropriate technical assistance that enables LDC institutions to adopt the lessons discussed above. Training is a specific example of assistance that frequently promotes a blueprint rather than a learning approach to project management. The advice of the donors should be consistent with what we know has been successful!

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