Transparent Collaboration Amongst Stakeholders - The Key To Project Performance

Adesh Jain
National Honorary President,
PMA and Chairman,
International Institute of Projects
and Program Management (I2P2M)
info@i2p2m.com

Aligning stakeholders is the key to awakening 'Project Consciousness'. Whenever we undertake projects it is in regard to building the future which in turn gives rise to the challenge of facing numerous uncertainties. The conflicting interests of various stakeholders, a common aspect in most projects adds to the level of uncertainties that have to be managed in the project. Stakeholders view the project from different perspectives with different expectations and the possible inward looking quest of 'What is in it for me' makes it extremely difficult to create a common denominator.

Trust amongst the stakeholders must be the starting point at the beginning of the project to create benefit through the project for all the stakeholders. When we begin the project it is essential that we start with the end in mind. This end should be viewed keeping in mind the expectations of all the stakeholders. Looking at a project only from the viewpoint of our own expectations is a narrow vision that will give rise to unnecessary issues. The Goal of envisioning a new future must get translated into evolving Strategies. This is the END that we need to consider first before making any BEGINING. In the first phase of implementing our strategies, projects are undertaken which

use resources and produce Outcomes. Operations are in the second phase of our strategies where we exploit the outcomes by operational efficiency to realize the benefits.

Excessive 'monitoring' by management with the vested interest of directing and controlling the project is totally out of date. This presumes that the person who is monitoring the project is more knowledgeable about resolving the complexities whereas in real life this may not be true. External monitoring should be minimal and internal assessment should take precedence. This can happen only when we develop an attitude of Trust that the other party is as much interested or even more interested to realize the 'End benefit' for which a project was undertaken.

There are basically two types of conflicts which could take place when we undertake projects.

▶ **Conflict 1:** This conflict is between one project in regard to other projects (Pi to Pj). The project selection can be more effective when we look at the priority of the END aim and ensure we are actually clear about the end result that we want to achieve. The project could be independent or part of Portfolio management. As resources are limited, the

value proposition of where best to deploy the resources should be built into the selection process.

▶ **Conflict 2:** This is between a project and the stakeholders (P and Si where i varies from 1 to n). The stakeholders are so diversified and have their own vested interest in the project that it is impossible to arrive at 100% alignment among them. It is a big challenge to minimize the sum total of stakeholders' conflict level. However, instead of looking for 100% agreement between the stakeholders we should instead look at how we can maximize the value proposition that will satisfy the larger community of stakeholders. This can easily be achieved through Transparency as transparency alone provides Metrics and Measurements through which the stakeholders can judge the rationale. Trust and Transparency (T2) become the main drivers in minimizing stakeholder conflicts. T2 can only be sustainable if what we 'Think' is what we 'Say' and what we 'Do'. Aligning three vectors if I take shelter of mathematics, makes the correlation maximum when they are fully aligned. Cosine 0 degree is 1.

In today's era of globalization, the rate of change is unprecedented. Never before in the history of civilization, has the interconnectivity amongst the human beings across the globe been almost instantaneous. What we see is the beginning of a new world in formation. This new world requires a driving force based on 'right information' increasing the probability of taking right decisions and thus achieving the desired end. Experts must pool their resources to do crystal gazing in terms of risk management. Future holds many risks, therefore, risks must be viewed from 360 degrees by those who could be in a better position to forecast. Forecasting the possible outcomes based on risks is the major challenge for proactive actions and not merely the post mortem of what we could have done.

The customers or the owners need not have the depositary of all expertise. They must collaborate in a seamless transparent way with the Consultants and Contractors. The integration of Customers, Consultants and Contractors (IC3) holds the key in dynamically taking full cognizance of the changes happening in a project in context of the environment and pooling their best resources to take mid course corrective actions. We must not confine the expert nodal points only with owners. Often contractors have a better understanding of the ground reality being the 'foot soldiers'. The collaboration amongst all the players in on expertise. Experts must use metrics in simple formats to the extent that even non-experts can understand them easily. Again, this can only happen if there is no vested interest of an individual party but the optimization of the whole and not of parts. In control system, it is often said that the optimization strategies for a system often differs from that of sub-systems. Through transparent collaboration we can together build a better 'whole' as a society and as a profession instead of optimizing parts by focusing on 'what is in it for me' syndrome.

The challenge in today's interconnected world is to transform to project mindset. The phrase 'project mindset' was introduced by the author of this paper while conducting a half day seminar on 'Project Mindset - the key to competitiveness' in Stockholm, Sweden in August 1999. It is the project mindset which can provide a platform for transparent collaboration. Let us look briefly at some of the characteristics of project mindset.

When a man is intelligent, he thinks about the whole picture first and it is later that the picture gets divided into details. It is in this light that we need to be on the balcony and the dancing floor simultaneously. We need to wear reading glasses so as to be ready to take them off when looking at the far objects i.e. focusing on the vision and mission.

We look at the system holistically and then break it down to sub-systems and then in the second phase, integrate sub-systems/parts into the system.

Project mindset is a condition of 'holistic' state reflecting seamless connectivity of benefits/realization first to its execution later. In this process, we focus on conclusions first. In a way, we can say that in project management, we must choose the RIGHT PROJECT before executing the PROJECT RIGHT. The selection of the right project can take place only if we look at the various conclusions first. It may not be out of place here to give a story of Buddha, the founder of Buddhist religion some 2500 years ago. He was from the Royal family and the prince destined to become King. He looked at the inevitable end of one's life (conclusions) and thus decided to undertake the projects i.e. renunciation of princely comforts and taking the project of finding the truth of life. It is in this light of project mindset that stakeholders' analysis and alignment must precede the undertaking of a project. With this in view, the differences which would emerge during execution will have better chances of resolution.

Project mindset views the known and unknown in parallel with a aim to reduce the ratio of unknown to known. Unknowns give rise to uncertainties. Future is not known and therefore inherently uncertain. It is a challenge to accelerate the rate of reduction of uncertainties to reach the end as visualized.

Project mindset constantly applies the art and science of managing change. The 'science' component is relatively simple as it can be rationalized but it is the challenge to project mindset in dealing with the 'art' part – component of human behaviour. It is an iceberg where the tip of the iceberg is the science part and submerged part which we may not see is the art part. The art part is in a way related to behavioral domain of individuals and that of the team. IPMA Competency Baseline

(ICB) pays a lot of emphasis on both the art and science components of managing change through project mindset. Behavioral, Technical and Contextual domains of ICB are significant in constantly managing change.

Project mindset adapts dynamically without adjusting to the human value. Project mindset is not chained with the predetermined or precedents. It encourages encountering new challenges never faced before rather than repeating the same encounters or experience again and again. It is akin to breaking boundaries to innovate but often this part of project mindset is stifled as there is no need to do things differently than what we are used to.

Let me end by giving the excerpts of my presentation at NASA's 'PM Challenge' Seminar in February 2012 at Orlando, Florida, USA. The topic was **"Awakening project consciousness by stakeholders buying in".**

The **E4** factor i.e. **Education, Experience, Emotions and Expectations** is unique for every human being. No E4 is better than the other. It is like a finger print. No one can say that my finger print is better than someone else's. On this earth, we have 6.9 billion unique E4s. The challenge for planning and implementing projects, programs and portfolios is to integrate different E4s to supplement each other creating a better possibility of achieving what we have visualized. Complacency that 'I know all' is out of date in the new race of mankind seeking truth with faster speed than ever before.

If we appreciate the uniqueness of E4, then we will be humble and build the most effective team around a project and thus bring about CHANGE.

Build Teams based on TRUST

Taken from Adesh Jain's Presentation at NASA PM Challenge in Orlando, USA in Feb. 2012.

Education + Emotions + Experience + Expectations (E4)

Every person in the world has an unique E4. It is like a finger print. The challenge is to synergize different E4s.