The Impact of Stakeholder Communication on Quality of Facilities Management Projects

Mabatho Zungu, and Stanley Fore

Abstract—This study investigates the effects of communication on project quality with reference to the Facilities Management Projects at the Life assurance Company. The research study used qualitative methodology research design to approach data collection and analysis, complimented by survey questionnaires to analyze the effect of communication on Facility Management (FM) project quality. The survey data emerging from survey questionnaires was analysed by means of quantitative analysis using (SPSS) Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The research argues that stakeholder’s expectations and interests must be communicated throughout all stages of the project life-cycle in order to improve the success of the project. The study revealed that Stakeholder communication is a core essential element which affects the quality of the FM projects. Thus the study concludes that all facilities management projects must incorporate communication into the project decision-making to enhance the project outcome which appeals to all project stakeholders

Keywords—Communication, Project Quality, Stakeholder Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

For many decades past, the success or effectiveness of projects has often been measured by project managers using various assessment instruments and in this context project success has always been conflated with project quality. Gido and Clements [1] indicates project success has much to do with meeting the needs of the customer, and this concurs with Summers [2] conception of project quality. As stated by Aaltonen, Jaako and Toumas, project managers must consider stakeholders’ needs and requirements in order to ensure project success [3]. Traditionally, project success assessment has often been technically driven by narrowly focusing on key factors such as time, cost and quality standards. However, emerging literature argues that the measurement of project success should go beyond technical confinement [4]. For example, some projects are completed within a specified time and budget, but fail because they compromise the needs of customers or intended project beneficiaries.

While there is significant recognition of the role of communication in a project from a scholarly point of view, the concepts of stakeholder, as it relates to communication and quality, needs further attention. Historically, project quality assessment had always been conceptualized as a technical undertaking with an assumption that project quality can be achieved through technical intervention. It is thus within this context that the paper provides literature, which traces the origin and development of project management from a historical perspective. The review pays particular attention to the practical application of project management (as a field of enquiry) with specific reference to how project quality has been conceptualized over time.

A. What is Project Quality?

Portny et al. [5] define quality as specifications that are set by the client to achieve a goal. Carrutheners in Steyn et al. [6] mentions that quality means different things to different people depending on their view point, but in a debate that has lasted for twenty years it has been agreed that quality means meeting the needs and the expectations, both expressed and implied, of the customer and the stakeholder. The quality of a project, product or service is determined by the level of satisfaction or, at worst, the level of acceptance of the stakeholder. Quality of project, therefore, starts at the establishment phase, establishing the needs and, therefore, the brief of the scope, and flows through all phases of the project until close out [6]. Burke also concurs by stating that PMBOK [7] defines project quality management as a process, which is required to ensure that the project will satisfy the needs for which it was undertaken.

B. What is a stakeholder?

Aaltonen et al.[3] state that the most common definition of project stakeholder is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the project. While this definition appears to lack some basic conceptual elements, Freeman and Anderson in Jepsen and Eskerod [8] agree with Aaltonen that a project stakeholder is a person who influences or is influenced by the project. Larsson and Gray [9] also appear to be in agreement with the above notion of stakeholder, they, however, emphasise that the group of people and the organisation that is involved in the project may be positively or negatively affected by the project. It is fascinating that this definition of the stakeholder advances an idea that human involvement in a project plays a significant role.

Mabatho Zungu is a part-time Masters student at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa. She is working full time as an Operations Manager in one of the local Banks. (mabathozung@gmail.com)

Stanley Fore is a lecturer at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Department of Management & Project Management, in the Faculty of Business. (fores@cuput.ac.za; +27 21 460 3516)
C. Communication in the project environment

Various authors are increasingly becoming aware of the value of communication in project management, particularly in relation to project quality. According to Mehta [10], careful communication planning and setting the right expectations with all project stakeholders is critical. The project environment invariably entails a great deal of interaction among stakeholders. There are numerous ways to define project stakeholders. Aaltonen, Jaako, and Toumas ([3] define project stakeholders as any group or individual who can affect, or who are affected by the project. But before moving on to discuss this important topic, it is important to ask: What is communication? Like with project quality, there is no common definition of communication. Pawkes and Gregory [11] define communication as, essentially, the interpersonal process of sending and receiving a message. Prahanski and Benton [12] also argue that communication is the glue that holds together a channel of distribution.

II. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

The main purpose of the study was to establish whether or not stakeholder communication (specifically in FM projects) has any effect on the quality of the projects. The basis for the formation of this study was informed by a slack of research in the area of communication and project quality within the South African context. While Burke [13] stated that project managers spend ninety percent of their time in some form of communication, it was not clear whether or not his analysis postulates that communication affects the quality of a project. It is within this context that the study posits to investigate the effects of communication on project quality.

III. METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

A. Data Collection

The data collection methods adopted in this study was informed by the qualitative research design. The study utilized quite a number of data collection methods which includes amongst others; interview, survey interviews, focus group interviews and observation. Interviews and personal communications related to the research are two important primary sources that the researcher used to understand the effect of communication on the FM project quality. Most importantly, the transcripts of interviews and the observation data are key primary sources in the research. The annual survey report that was completed by tenants at the life assurance company was used to gauge the views of stakeholders (tenants) about the quality of Facility Management (FM) projects. The monthly reports drawn by the Facility Management’s help desk were also used to identify areas of concerns from different stakeholders. Minutes of FM project meetings were also used to analyse the effect of communication on projects, and to also analyse matters arising owing to communication. All these documents formed the crucial parts of data sources for the study.

B. Data Analysis

SPSS application was used to analyse data captured through questionnaires that were completed by participants. The software produced graphs which were analysed through the qualitative method. All the data that was collected was represented through graphs, tables and numeric figures), and these datasets were interpreted qualitatively.

IV. RESULTS

A. Facility Management Projects at the life assurance company

The focus group respondents highlighted that for any FM projects to be executed successfully, it is crucial that the project team should work collectively. While this point was mentioned as one of the requirements, the respondents, however, placed more emphasis on specific project resources and stakeholders as proxy to execute the FM project successfully. The resources or stakeholders that they have identified are:

- Tenants -: these people are important as they need to be informed of any work that is planned to be undertaken, when and where, especially if there are services that would be interrupted in the building.
- Contractors -: these people are crucial as their main task is to repair, maintain and install new equipment in the building. Therefore, the FM projects cannot set off without their inputs. This includes contractors that provide services such as cleaning, security, landscaping, waste management, and so on;
- Specialist consultants -: these project experts are required to provide guidance and advice on legal matters, especially on issues related to industrial relations, as well as any electrical, mechanical or structural design or repairs; and
- Suppliers or wholesalers -: that supply material and equipment to the contractors and consultants that are used by the FM service provider or supplier directly.

B. Communication channels in the FM project context

It is crucial to note that stakeholders in the organisation or projects create communication channels, which are necessary to exchange material resources (including human capital) for the success of the project. It is indeed clear that communication in a project is often initiated and sustained by stakeholders to deliver the project’s desired outcome/s. Therefore, without proper communication, stakeholders may not be committed sufficiently to improve the quality of the project. Like any other projects, FM projects have different phases and within each phase there is a specific communication channel, which engages stakeholders in project decision making.

While it is necessary for all stakeholders to participate in the project (by means of a communication channel), it is crucial to cautiously mention that the level of stakeholder engagement in the project is often not equal. This was
discovered during the field work, as some of the stakeholders argued that their participation in the project is uneven across the project cycle.

It is important to raise this question because those stakeholders who participate in the early stages of the project have the advantage of receiving a clear scope from major stakeholders. This is due to the fact that major stakeholders or stakeholders who have power in the project appeared to have attended project meetings during the initial phase of the project. It is critical for all stakeholders to be represented at the definition phase so that all parties can communicate critical information that might affect the quality of the project.

C. Communication during different project phases

As indicated in Figure 1, the answer to the above question shows that all the structural engineer’s stakeholder groups stated that they commence their participation in the project at the definition phase.

The figure above proves positive as structural engineers invariably participate in the project at the definition stage. In the context of FM projects, structural engineers are part of the larger group of project engineers who are involved in the technical aspects of the project. By virtue of their knowledge and expertise, they are, therefore, invited by the FM project coordinator during the early stages of the project to design the project scope and specification.

As one of the respondents stated, structural engineers’ involvement in the early stages of the project is due to the fact that they are usually appointed to assess and compile a report prior to the commencement of the project. Electrical and mechanical engineers are normally part of the definition phase because they provide designs and layout, while electrical, mechanical and lift contractors do the actual planning before execution. The OHS (Occupational Health and Safety) sees to it that projects are executed according to the safety standards; hence, they are involved in projects during the initiation and planning phases. Electrical and lift contractors are amongst the few stakeholders who are invited to participate in the project during the execution phase, and none of the stakeholders are invited to the project during the closing phase because this is when project handover takes place. While the project engineers who deal with the technical aspects of the project are set to participate in the early stages of the project, it is critical to note that the tenants participate prior to the definition phase during problem identification. Invariably, without tenants’ problem identification (often expressed through complaints), there will be no projects that are undertaken (Figure2).

As shown in the above diagram, the success of the project depends on the extent to which project planning and the execution process addresses the problem that was identified by tenants at the life assurance company. The major question is how do tenants communicate problem identification to the project engineers? According to the FM Call centre/Help desk manager, the tenants communicate their concerns directly to the FM via the call centre. The FM call centre manager conducts a call analysis report every month to assess the problems in order to determine whether the problem should be attended to by the technical team. If the nature of the problem warrants the technical team’s attention, then the facilities manager further assesses the problem and holds the meeting with the tenants first, and then with the project engineers.

Once the project sets off, the pattern of communication between (client) tenants and the rest of the project team members continues whereby the project team members constantly update tenants about latest project developments via email. For instance, the tenants receive emails on a weekly basis. Should the tenants have any queries, which relate to the on-going project, they can express these via the helpdesk by means of telephone or the email medium of communication? According to the National Technical Manager, if a major problem is raised by a tenant concerning the project, then the FM manager schedules a meeting.
It was fascinating to learn, as indicated in Figure 3, above, that a larger proportion of the respondents across FMU project stakeholders agreed that there is a stronger link between communication and the needs of the stakeholders. For instance, 50 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, while 38 percent agreed and 12 percent remained neutral. It is important to mention that the last category of response (neutral) appeared to be so because the respondents were not knowledgeable of the subject, or have not dealt with any situation of a similar nature.

There is also evidence that some stakeholders tend to value communication during certain stages of the project lifecycle. Others believe that communication at an initial phase could achieve the required quality, while some hold the view that the final stage is critical to obtain the desired project outcome (quality). It is for this reason that only 65 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that there should be communication with all stakeholders in order to achieve the project’s desired goals, while 35 percent agreed (see Figure 4 below).

The results shown in Figure 5 indicate that 100 percent of the consultants and other stakeholders agreed that communication is a prerequisite of project quality. Conversely, 80 percent of the service providers also agreed that project quality is determined by communication, while only 20 percent of them disagreed that communication is a determinant factor of project quality. Given the above analysis, there is a strong view amongst stakeholders that communication is crucial in order to realise project goals and objectives, which will ultimately meet the needs of the clients. It was also fascinating to learn, unlike the popular notion motivated by the techno-centred view of project management, that communication, in addition to cost and time, does affect the quality of the project. One of the respondents acknowledged that cost and time do affect the quality, and also added that if there is no communication about how much will be spent and for how long among the stakeholders, that the project amounts to a failed project. In the case of the FMU project, it was crucial to find out whether or not all modes of communication do indeed help to improve ultimate project quality.

As indicated in Figure 6 above, 52 percent of the stakeholders agreed that all forms of communication improved the quality of the project, while 43% of them strongly agreed. Of these, only 6 percent of them remained neutral. Once again, the results in the above graph also support the notion that communication is crucial if it enhances project quality. As one of the respondents stated,
communication allows the sharing of knowledge, information and resources, which are necessary for the success of the project. This success of the project is the ability of the project to meet the needs of stakeholders, including the client. In the context of this study, project success and stakeholder needs are key components of project quality. As shown in this section, project quality can be obtained if stakeholders communicate effectively about how resources, time and other project elements should be utilised and shared in order to achieve the project’s desired outcomes.

The data analysis presented in this chapter outlined the information that was gathered during the focus group sessions and the completed questionnaires by different stakeholders. The results indicated that communication is used throughout all stages of the project, from the inception to the handover stage. No project can begin without any form of communication. The scope of the project can only be achieved if there is clear communication, which provides a detailed plan, what should be done, when, by whom and how. If this information is not clearly communicated, then the quality of the project will be compromised.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Indeed it is clear, based on the findings of this study, that communication affects project quality. The study moves beyond its analysis to define project quality as the extent to which the project deliverables meet the needs of project stakeholders, especially project end-users or clients. For these needs to be incorporated into projects there must be communication with these stakeholders at least throughout the project lifecycle.

A. Communication channels used at the life assurance company during FM projects

Communication has been used throughout all stages of the FM projects. It is important to note that forms of communication such as the scope, technical drawings, telephone calls, emails, and faxes were cited as important means or channels of engaging various stakeholders in the project.

However, the extent to which communication directly affects project quality was not clear to some stakeholders. While this may appear as a concern, it is crucial to mention that all their narratives of FM project communication examples, as well as their pitfalls in terms of quality, suggest that communication affects project quality. As pointed out in earlier in the paper, these pitfalls were a result of a lack of communication between the technical project managers and tenants or other end-users of the FM project.

B. Communication and its effect on the quality of projects

At a broader level, private and public institutions are increasingly mandated to incorporate some forms of communication in their projects. In the case of South Africa, there are a number of policy and legislative frameworks, which compel project managers to conduct public participation prior to project implementation. These include, but are not limited to: the Development Facilitations Acts (DFA) of 1996; the Municipal Systems Act (MSA) of 1998; and the Spatial Development Frameworks Acts (SDF) of 1996. In particular, these policy and legislative tools are essentially informed by concepts of sustainable development with a particular focus on ensuring that current development, through project management, should consider future generations. Due to these recent trends it is clear that the idea now is that project management should seek to incorporate all aspects and forms of communication to ensure that project deliverables appeal to all project stakeholders, particularly project clients. Thus, there is an urgent need to recognise project stakeholders, especially end-users across generations. What is the interest of both current and future generation project end-users and stakeholders? And what costs would potentially be transferred to them as a result of poor project planning, which is caused by a lack of communication during the project lifecycle? These are remnant questions that should be addressed in the field of project management.

C. Stakeholder communication

In the early stages of the project lifecycle there is a need for the formulation of a project stakeholder communication plan, which should be an integral part of the project scope. The purpose of this plan will indicate how project teams will engage or communicates with each other across all levels of stakeholders, including their representatives. This means that prior to the formulation of the project scope; stakeholders must have some form of stakeholder engagement contract, which binds contractors, engineers and other technical project stakeholders to adhere to the Stakeholder Communication Plan (SCP).

D. Stakeholder interest and project quality

The study also revealed that most of the FM projects compromised quality owing to the fact that tenant stakeholder interests were not communicated effectively during the project lifecycle. As a result, project delivery did not meet the needs of the tenants, yet the projects were successfully completed in terms of adhering to time, scope and costs, which are associated with these projects. Therefore, there is an urgent need to recognise that project stakeholder interests should be communicated during the project lifecycle. Irrespective of their knowledge, power, and resources, laymen stakeholders should participate in every decision that is made concerning the project. Various communication strategies and channels should be utilised to engage all stakeholders in the project. For instance, in the case of the FM, the project team should arrange focus group meetings and other means as avenues to allow interactive and self-mobilised forms of communication so that all stakeholders (including tenants) participate meaningfully in project decision making prior to the inception of the project, and until project completion. This means that tenants should be well informed about projects and the reason why projects are executed.
While the FM projects at the life assurance company were initiated by using contemporary and cutting-edge technology to allow effective communication, the study revealed that key decisions that were made in the project were often driven by technical discourses and practices. In many cases, stakeholder participation, via communication, was given preference to technical engineers and experts to decide when and how the project should operate. As a result, tenants (project end users or key stakeholders) at the life assurance company were often neglected in project decision making, because they lack the technical knowledge, which is necessary to participate in projects’ technical oriented decision making.

VI. Future Study

Due to the fact that this study was conducted at a life assurance company, which is a private organisation, there is a need to conduct further studies of this nature in projects which are operated by the government. For instance, with reference to the low cost house and service delivery development project, there is a view that the violent strikes and dissatisfaction of the local communities are a result of a lack of communication.

REFERENCES

[7] PMBOK