

POLITICS AND PROJECT EXECUTION: HOW ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS IMPACT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROJECT MANAGERS: THE GOVERNMENT'S DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

Politics, the grouping together of people for power in any structural entity is not discussed much in the field of project management. Beyond satisfying the iron triangle expectations, critical issues of politics and power affect effective project execution. Project managers and other internal stakeholders jostle for control of resources, and their power base is politics. Effective project management cannot ignore the politics of organizations, as it is these political factors that determine the success or failure of a project. Depending on the size and the interest on the project by senior management, political influence threads through the whole organisational structure, too often it is accepted as the norm. The survey sought to establish the extent to which political forces are used by senior management and can be used by the project manager in project execution to pre-empt the effects of the authority gap in project management. This paper establishes that there is tremendous interference during project executions to varying degrees as a result of political interests, the management styles of senior management, organisational structure and factors, and the extent of personal stakeholder interests in the project. The target population for the empirical research was operational and management staff of two large government construction projects, which employ approximately 800 people per site, including 46 subcontractors and their staff. Questionnaires were administered through personal interviews giving a 100% questionnaire return rate. The results point to constant political interference from external and internal stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: Project execution, resource allocation, decision making, power and politics.

• INTRODUCTION

For any effective management of projects, the project manager should have an understanding of the structure and culture of the organization in which the project is embedded. Inefficiency in public decision systems in large corporations and the government, specifically relating to projects, has been a concern for many public management students (Weingast, Shepsle and Johnsen,

1981:642 - 664). The formation of any group of people immediately results in a quest to exert power and control, which leads to politics. Power is closely linked to politics, and politics involves; the activities of an individual or a group of individuals, which are used to acquire, develop or control the resources to achieve one's preferred outcomes. Pinto (2000:85 - 91) suggests a link between project management and the ability of a project manager to understand the critical role that is played by politics in project success. In a sense, politics is the management of influence by individuals or groups to get outcomes or processes to outcomes that have not otherwise been sanctioned by the organization. Aquinas (2006:305) posits that power is closely linked to the concept of politics, and that power is used to advance personal or organizational interests. These political behaviours in the organization are not required as part of the formal organization, yet they influence the distribution of resources and, consequently, the outcome of any undertaking by the organization. This paper is focussed on the top down use of politics by senior managers and how this interference renders the project manager and the project team as mere spectators and not the deciders of the destiny of the project.

CAUSES OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN AN ORGANIZATION

Project management is heavily infiltrated by politics, as project managers work in an environment with an authority gap (Jawah, 2012:1097-1106) which leaves project managers without much power. The absence of both power and authority therefore results in a project manager with no stable power base. In large organisations, projects generally exist outside of the functional authority (Sy and D'Annunzio, 39-48) because they integrate different departments, meaning that people are seconded to the project from their functional areas. McShane and von Glinow (2009:47) state advantages and disadvantages of such a system. The main advantages are; communication efficiency, project flexibility, knowledge sharing and maximisation of resource usage. The disadvantages are; dual and divided loyalty by project team members (more than one boss to report to), increase goal conflict, and the lack of clarity on subordinate expectations.

Because of this structure, the manager needs to negotiate for all the resources that are required since he / she does not have direct authority (Brown and Hyer, 2010:69). The presence of different groups with different personal and organizational goals working in one project, this coupled by the absence of clear leadership on pertinent issues resulting from the authority gap (Jawah, 2012:1097-1106), levels of uncertainty in certain issues in the absence of powerful leadership, and differences of opinion on what is the 'correct way', becomes breeding ground for divergent political formations. The decisions that are made in an organization will always create conflicting interests between the affected; this moves project practitioners into political niches. Mitchell and Larson Jr (1987:416) identify two real causes of conflicting opinions, which result in political formations as differentiation and resource scarcity.

Resource allocation is a critical component of project success (Jones and Larson, 2008:235), which affects directly the time, cost and possibly quality of the project. Because the politics of these projects is based on power in relation to resource allocation, by implication, therefore, project politics has a role that it plays in the effective implementation of the project.

Organizational issues tend to be more complex to deal with than the actual project execution

itself. The effect of politics on project implementation is a serious factor, which causes failure of operations; in general, projects are no exception to this rule.

ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Schalbe (2008: 50, 51) identifies four different organisational frameworks, namely the structural frame, human resources frame, political frame, and symbolic frame. Of special interest to this study are the structural, political and symbolic frames.

- The structural frame defines groups and their roles and responsibilities, as depicted in the organisational chart. It is rational and emphasises coordination and control with clearly defined chains of command.
- The symbolic frame concerns the meaning and not what has taken place. The visit of a project sponsor to the project site may be because he is angry and dissatisfied, or because he supports the progress.
- The political frame relates to organisational and individuals' competition and jostling for power and leadership to influence the activities in the project. Organisations are coalitions of different types of people who have different individual goals that are often in conflict with the organisation's objectives.

When decisions are taken on the allocation of scarce resources, or on controversial operational issues, power becomes a critical necessity for the project manager. Outside the formal sources of power, namely legitimate, expert and referent power, the manager needs an extra source of power to receive cooperation from other sections (Buchanan and Badham, 2008:46).

Resources are central to the effectiveness of the project manager, and political power, therefore, becomes a necessity that project managers cannot ignore. Organisational politics (Ireland and Hitt, 2007:63–77) refer to organisational politics as activities that managers engage in to increase their formal power, and to use power effectively to reduce opposition and resistance, whilst increasing cooperation, which is required to achieve set goals. Jones and George (2009:615) concur with this view and assert that managers use politics to influence decisions in their favour.

An understanding of the political side of project management and the often intensely political nature of project implementation gives rise to the associated need to develop appropriate attitudes and strategies, which help project managers to operate effectively within the system (Sense and Antoni, 2003: 487-494).

The field of project management is particularly filled with political processes for several unique reasons. Vigoda and Cohen (2002: 311-324) suggest that organization politics is also a controversial concept, as there is hardly any doubt that internal politics is a common phenomenon in every organization. Because project managers managing embedded projects do not have a stable power base, that is either a high status or over-riding authority; they must learn to cultivate other methods of influence in order to secure the necessary resources. Many project managers are not given the authority to conduct formal performance evaluations on their project team subordinates, denying them an important base of hierarchical power. The authority gap in project management allows

for political forces that seek to compete for authority, or to dis-empower the project manager. The effects of this gap necessitates the need to identify how project politics affects effective project execution. But the question that comes into mind is; is there political interference in the running of projects in an organisation managed-by-projects?

Line and or functional managers with authority need specific skills to manage conflict resulting from personality differences and perceptions on how to achieve the organisational goals (Brewer, Mitchell and Weber, 2002:78 - 95). These managers have functional authority and legitimate power as they are able to fire and hire. Contrary to this tradition of managers, the situation is compounded for the project manager, who apart from needing this skill because they are managers, yet the project manager has to work under an authority gap (Jowah, 2012:1097-1106). It may become imperative, therefore, that project managers who are disadvantaged by the authority gap should develop political strategies which may provide power needed for their effective management. Political strategies are tactics that managers use to increase their power base, which they use to influence other people whilst overcoming resistance. These political tactics and strategies take the form of negotiating, lobbying, alliance, representation and socialization.

HOW DO PEOPLE USE POLITICAL POWER IN ORGANIZATIONS?

Kotler, as cited by Aquinas (2006:305), constructed a summary of how political actors use political power in organizations to achieve their aims. No manager will have enough power to influence the full loyalty of every subordinate, even if they did, the same power will not influence all subordinates at the same level and with the same impact. The table 1 below illustrates different forms or tactics, which are used in organizational politics.

TABLE 1. Political strategies and tactics in organisations

	WHAT THEY CAN INFLUENCE	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
FACE TO FACE METHODS			
Exercise of power based on position	Behaviour within zone that the other perceives as legitimate in light of the obligation	Quick-requires no outlay of tangible resources	Request outside acceptable zone will fail; if too far outside will be illegitimate.
Exercise of power based on perceived expertise	Attitudes and behaviour within the zone of perceived expertise	Quick- requires no outlay of tangible resources	. Request outside acceptable zone will fail; if too far outside will be illegitimate
Exercise of power based on identification with a manager	Attitudes/behaviour not in conflict with ideas that underlie the identification.	Quick-requires no expenditure of limited resources	Restricted to influence attempts not in conflict with ideals that underlie the identification.
Exercise of power based on perceived dependence	Wide range of behaviour that can be easily monitored.	Quick- can often succeed when other methods fail.	Repeated influence attempts encourage the other to gain power over the influencer.
Coercive exercise of power based on perceived dependence	Wide range of behaviour that can be easily monitored.	. Quick- can often succeed when other methods fail.	Invites retaliation, very risky.

	WHAT THEY CAN INFLUENCE	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Use persuasion	Very wide range of attitudes and behaviour	Produces internalised motivation; needs no monitoring; needs no power/outlay of scarce material resources	Can be very time consuming – requires other person to listen.
Combine these methods	Depends on the exact combination	Can be more potent and less risky than using a single method	More costly than using a single method.
INDIRECT METHODS			
Manipulate the other's environment by using any or all of the face to face methods	Wide range of behaviour and attitudes	Can succeed when face to face methods fail.	Can be time-consuming; is complex to implement; is very risky, especially if used frequently.
Change the forces that continuously act on the individual: formal organizational arrangements, informal social arrangements, technology, resources available, and statement of organizational goals.	Wide range of behaviour and attitudes on a continuous basis.	Has continuous influence, not just a one-shot effect; can have a very powerful impact	Often requires a considerable power outlay to achieve.

Source: Aquinas (2006:305),

The decisions on what project to be involved in, who should be given to be project manager, the composition of the project team, etc are themselves taken in a highly politicised environment. This is specifically so when there is a 'struggle for control' at the senior management level. There are too many stakeholders with different interests, and not all the interests may have the organisation as priority. The table above shows the likely responses to the different political pressures put in place or exerted. It is necessary to point out that the responses should be understood in the context of subordinate-project manager – senior manager – organisational objectives context.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Belout and Gauvreau (2004: 1-11) observe that project execution is a balanced use of resources within the limitations of the iron triangle of project management. Projects are largely managed as exclusively technical and not behavioural systems, with the consequent emphasis on meeting targets to the exclusion of the human resource that underlies the success of every project. The task of the project manager inevitably involves delineating, facilitating and coordinating tasks across different functional disciplines. To effectively manage these interdepartmental structures, project managers use, amongst others, networks, bar charts, job costing, task forces, partnering and scheduling, yet with all these tools, many projects continue to fail (Gray and Larson, 2008:12).

Project execution is integrative in its nature and practitioners need other inputs to augment their leadership, team building and planning skills in order for them to be effective. Besides, the strategic

plans and decisions on which projects to embark on are made at fairly senior levels with direct political implications and interests. The project managers are assigned to these projects long after all decisions have been taken, which renders them powerless 'project implementers.'

Political interference becomes inevitable, and these create the need to understand how much politics affects the effectiveness of a project manager's job. An assumption was made here that the project manager is an employee who also works within certain expectations and is subject to certain fears of negative reprisals if he/she does not play 'the game' of the organisation. The problem statement here is to what extent does senior management play politics-of-interference with the operations of projects.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary objective of this study was to establish if there is political interference in project execution, and if found, to identify the extent of the interference. It was hypothesized that technical skills and the ability to establish top class project teams, adequate education on leadership and experience in project execution are not exclusive project success factors. The project does not work in isolation of stakeholder-political interests and the conflicts that arise from differing opinions on resource allocation. Other interventions were deemed necessary, and hence the desire to check on the presence of one of those elements of project success or failure – political interference. The questions that were posed for this research were;

1. To what extent is politics a factor in project execution?
2. What elements of project execution were specifically interfered with?

Research Framework and Hypotheses

The generality of project managers have senior stakeholders who have special interests in different aspects of the operations. Given the authority gap that the project manager works under, it becomes imperative, therefore, that certain other sources of power should be used to achieve the intended results.

- H1 Project managers need external sources of power to execute their duties effectively.
- H2 Political formations are inevitable where there is so much at stake and little direct authority.
- H3 The greater the authority gap, the greater the likelihood of political interference in a project.

Empirical objectives

The empirical objectives that were formulated to support the research's primary and theoretical objectives are:

- Recognition of the importance of political ties to project implementation;
- Recognition of project politics as a critical project success factor; and
- Recognition of the divisive or progressive nature of project power politics.

It is important to state here that the sites had numerous contractors and subcontractors dealing with different aspects of the construction. The different project managers, who were expected to respond would therefore give a generic view of how project managers operate under such multi-organisational construction sites. The empirical objectives were to establish the presence of political interference as well as the extent (if there is interference) and identify the areas affected.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Target population and sample size

The survey sample comprised of project managers and team members of projects from two large government construction projects in Cape Town. There were numerous contractors and sub-contractors who formed part of these large construction projects. The project managers and team leaders and members were from differing disciplines relating to built environment. 77 respondents were interviewed in all, the rest of those who did not qualify were not interviewed.

Sampling and data collection method

Personal one-on-one interviews were conducted at the two sites with permission granted by the 'Head Projects' at the respective sites. All respondents who were approached completed the questionnaires themselves, which rendered a 100% response rate to the questionnaires. These questionnaires were pre-tested and restructured to assist with extracting the required information from respondents. All respondents remained 'unidentified' and the cooperation was encouraging. There was no sampling method used, every project team member that was identified and was available was interviewed. The selections were random since there was no pre-knowledge of who was a team member and in what capacity they worked. There were 10 different disciplines on sites, and a minimum of 6 people were interviewed per unit or discipline.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Project success

According to Scott-Young and Samson (2008: 749), successful project management is proper identification and effective execution of the project manager's authority, project manager's powers and his/her influence in managing the project. Project success is more than the completion of an activity within the constraints of the iron triangle (Kerzner, 2009: 9). Muller and Turner (2007: 298-307) assert that the most powerful, but frequently overlooked influencer of project success, is the role that political behavior plays in the executive of projects.

The research questions are listed in their order in the following sections with each question followed by the responses that were provided. The questionnaire was divided into three sections, with the first section focusing on the biography of the respondents. This section pre-qualified the respondents to participate in the survey, since it was exclusively for project team members or such people as will be affected by political interference in their operations. The questions were structured with pre-determined responses from which the respondents picked their answers.

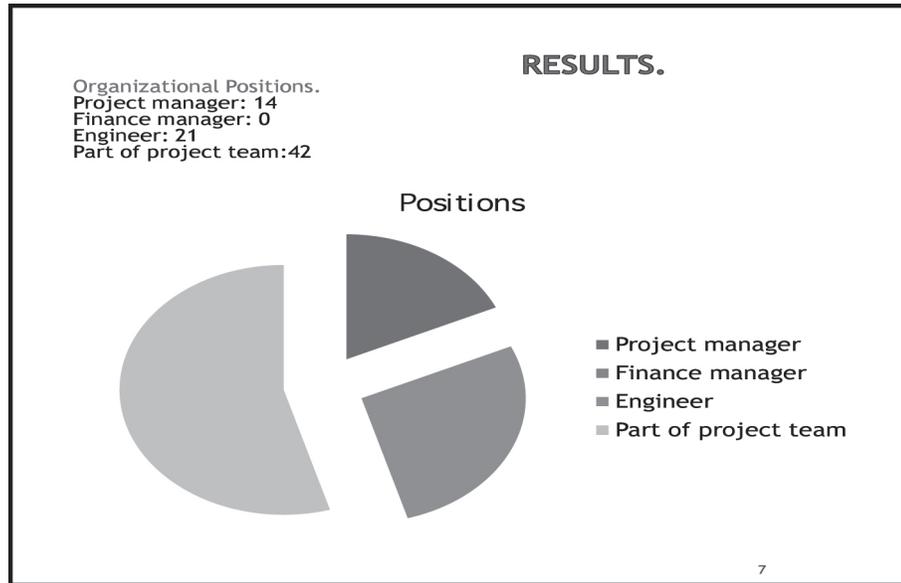
SECTION A

Question; what is your position in the organization

The purpose of this question was to determine if the respondent qualified to be in the study. This question also enabled the researcher to understand the general composition of the different project teams operating at these sites. The positions that were indicated on the questionnaire

were; project manager, finance manager, engineer or part of project team in whatever capacity. The results are illustrated in figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1: The distribution of the interviewees



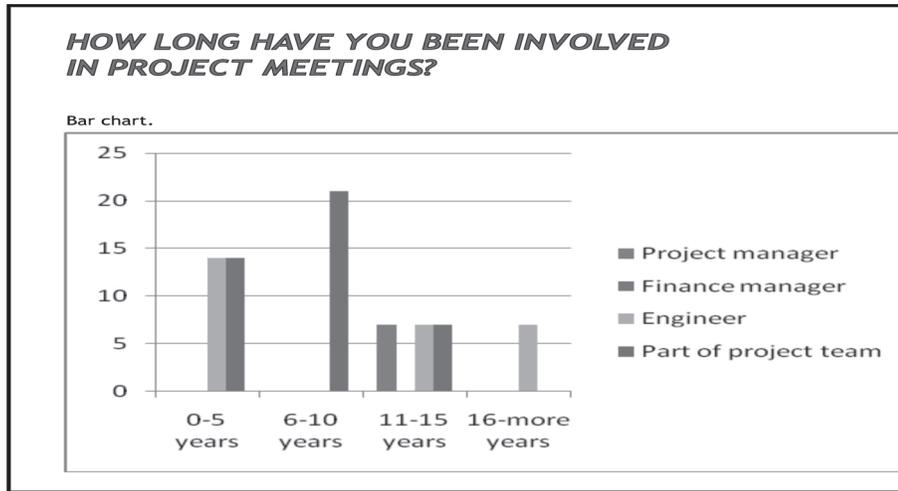
Source: Data analysed from the survey

The response; A total of 77 qualifying respondents were approached of which a total of 18% were project managers. ; no respondents claimed to be finance managers; 27% were engineers who are directly involved in the running of the project, but who were not designated as project managers; and 55% were other team members with diverse titles and designations, but were part of the project team and were equally affected, or effected power politics in the project.

Question: how long have you been involved in projects at the current level?

The experience of the respondent was considered to be important as this would give a wider view of the common practice in the industry. It was also envisaged that the time a respondent has been involved in this section would be able to make them differentiate between the different types of behaviour, whether political or non-political. Figure 2 below illustrates the findings.

FIGURE 2: The time or period of service in the respondents' current capacity



Source: Data analysed from survey

Just over 50% of the engineers had been employed for less than 5 years; 80% of the other team members ranged from 6 – 10 years; and 22% of the project managers had served for more than 10 years, which could have suggested a high labour turnover. But, no question had been asked on how long an individual respondent had been with the company concerned, nor how long that company had been in existence. Projects by their nature limited by time, and, depending on how many contracts a particular company is running, most of their middle management staff may be working from other sites.

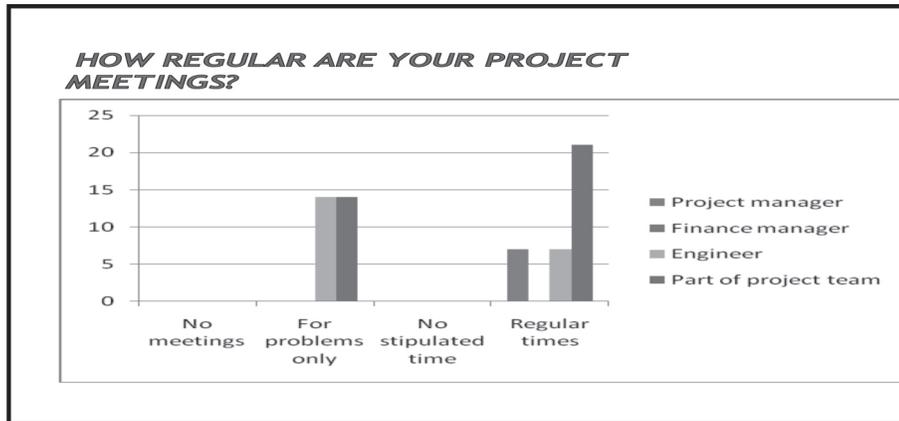
Question; how regularly do you attend project team meetings?

It was deemed important to know how regularly the respondents attended the meetings as a measure of how important the meetings are perceived to be. This also assisted in evaluating the possibility of some meetings being considered unimportant, if say, a senior manager is not coming. Project team members were requested to provide information regarding their rate of attendance at meetings. Emphasis was placed on their ability to call for a project team meeting. A total of 84% of the respondents (project managers) attended site meetings regularly; slightly below 60% of the engineers attended the meetings regularly; and just above 20% of the other team members attended regularly. The research questions did not specifically probe the nature or objectives of the meetings.

Question; how regularly are your meetings conducted?

The regularity of meetings may serve as an indication on the pressure and possibly the need to continuously address certain aspects of the project operations. On the other hand, it might be due to continued interference by senior stakeholders who might impromptly call a meeting now and then to communicate directly with team members and not through the project manager. The details of the are illustrated in figure 3 below.

FIGURE 3: Regularity of the project meetings



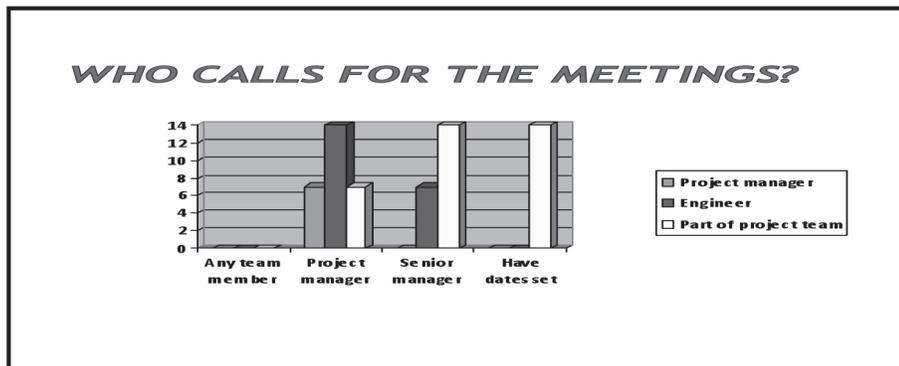
Source: Analysis of data from survey

A total of 80% of regular or scheduled meetings were well attended, with 58% of the attendees attending specifically for problem solving meetings. This might be because of the nature of the problems, or possibly departmental problems. This may be an indication of a crisis with the operations, or distrust by senior management, or panic by an indecisive project manager. This question led to the next question relating to who exactly had the right to call for the project team meetings.

Question; Who called for the project team meetings?

This question was key in that it showed the degree of involvement by the different levels of management as it related to the execution of the project. In most construction projects, feedback meetings are held at regular times, say once every week or every fortnight. The response to this question had certain interesting aspects as displayed in figure 4 below.

FIGURE 4: Who calls for project-team meetings?



Source: analysis from collected data

The responses helped to draw a relationship between the influence of the project managers and the response to their call for meetings. The senior management called for meetings at a rate twice the frequency of calls for meetings by the project manager or team members. This gives the impression that the project managers and the team members were micro-managed by senior management. It is not clear why the senior management got so much involved, but the presence of the senior management on a regular basis removes the power and little authority that the project manager, and the team members have over the project. It is also not clear of the call for meetings by the senior management had been at the request of the project managers of some of the team members. The question led to the next stage where clarity was required on the day to day activities of the senior management in project execution.

Question; are the senior managers involved in the day to day activities of the project? A total of 80% of the team members, namely 58% and 22% of the project managers conceded that senior managers were involved in the day to day running of the projects. No question had been included in the questionnaire on why the senior management would want to be involved in the day to day operations of the projects. Assumptions are made here that there may have been fear of failure by the contractors to meet their aspects of the iron triangle.

Question; do you have a full right to make decisions?

It was deemed necessary to measure the extent to which project team members could make decisions, this would explain further the degree of political interference if present. Part of the function of managers and their project teams is to make critical decisions on the execution of the project. If decisions are to be taken by senior management, then the success of the project would be dependent on the effectiveness of the senior manager and not that of the project manager and the team. Figure 7 below shows the response to the question above.

FIGURE 5: Full right to make decisions



Source: Analysis from collected data

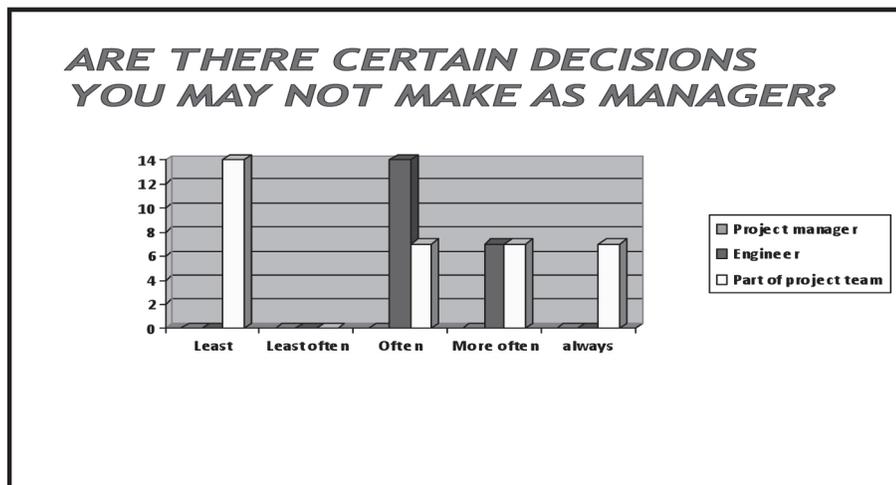
Project team members unanimously agreed that they are often allowed to make decisions on

project execution. This leaves room for some of the times that they may not be able to make decisions, however, this was not requested for in the survey. Interesting figures emerged from the engineers and project managers (50%) who believe that they are not always allowed to make decisions. This question was followed up by the next question.

Question; Are there certain decisions you may not make as manager?

This question is closely related to the question above. The question is rather trying to understand if there are known decisions or problems where decisions that the management would not be allowed to make. In other words, there are certain areas of the business or specific issues where they are not allowed to make decisions. Example; they may not be allowed to make decisions on the employment of a new person, or may not be allowed to decide on the salary of a new person. The responses to the question are illustrated in figure 6 below.

FIGURE 6: Rate of decisions that may not be made by project managers



Source: Analysis of data collected from survey

Engineers and project team members believe that 100% of the time there are certain decisions that they are not allowed to make. This limits the power of the project manager and his team on specific issues, which is a clear indication of both authority gap and political interference with operations.

Question; are you allowed to make decisions on suppliers for material?

This may be put in the procurement strategy or may be a result of senior management interference as and when they want to. Here, the question was tried to evaluate the degree of interference on strategic aspects of project procurement. Response; the findings are that 67% of the times they are not allowed to decide on who the suppliers may be. This may be because of an existing procurement policy, possibly with suppliers pre-determined before commencement of the project. But it is important to state categorically that most projects will have contracts with material suppliers, but may have other materials supplied by cold selling sales representatives.

The project team members and engineers believed that they had full decision making rights over fellow team members, while the engineers and project managers suggested that they had a right more often than not (50%).

CONCLUSION

As discussed in the preceding literature review and as indicated in the findings of the short interviews conducted, senior management seems to micro-manage certain aspects of the project operations. Many reasons can be advanced, it may be the senior management want to make sure that the project is delivered in time, it may be because of distrust in the ability of the project manager and the team to deliver the product according to specifications, or it could be because the project they are involved in is related to other projects by other subcontractors, and they feel the push to get the work done. Or it may be, simply because the senior management, or someone in senior management may have vested interests in the operations outside of the organisational objectives. What is evident however is that there is an inseparable link between senior management politics and the execution of the project.

The effectiveness of the project manager and the team may not be easy to evaluate since the senior management is involved at every stage. A weak project manager may take comfort in this transactional style of leadership, specifically if they do not know much about the project execution processes. A weak project manager leading a strong and more powerful project team, may take comfort in the presence of senior management as that reduces both conflicts and accountability from the project manager to the senior manager. A weak manager may need to develop strategic alliances with senior management as a political ploy develop more power, have less mistakes, and be able to control what otherwise would have been a difficult team to lead. The difficulty emanates from the presence of the authority gap inherent in matrix structures, largely because of dual loyalty and the temporary nature of a project. The inability of the project manager to decide on who is hired or seconded to the project creates a power vacuum which reduces the project manager to a project coordinator without powers.

The use of traditional management models has resulted in difficulty in the execution of projects, as politics becomes the oil that lubricates the machinery. Most managers would shy away from the thought of politics and projects, yet, well calculated project politics leads to effective execution. Consequently, project managers cannot afford to turn their backs on organisational politics, because it is this politics that threads its way through the different organisational boundaries. Managers should understand how to use the politics for their success in project management. The need for politics is more pronounced when the project manager is working with people seconded from other departments. These professionals have a problem of dual loyalty, but because they know the project is limited by time, they may pay much more attention to their functional department where they are seconded from. It is important therefore for the project manager to develop political links to overcome possible resistance by functional managers, resistance of which may affect project delivery.

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