Chapter 17

Sustainability in Project Management: Perceptions of Responsibility

Debby Goedknegt
HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

When the project sponsor is responsible for the definition of the content of the project and the project manager for delivering this content, who then is responsible for incorporating sustainability in the process? Which project governance role has which responsibility to incorporate sustainability aspects in the project management process? This chapter shows how a project manager can influence the way sustainability is implemented in the project and the project management process. This perception is based on the notion that the project manager is intrinsically motivated to work on a sustainable project, and to achieve sustainable results.

INTRODUCTION

“In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations” (UN, 1987). This implies, as Nelmara Arbex has said, “We need to change the way we view things in order to change the way we do things.” One of the key concepts of sustainability is that sustainability is about balancing or harmonizing social, environmental and economic interests, and it takes notice of both the short and the long term aspects. This is also known as the “Triple Bottom Line” (Elkington 1999); People (social), Planet (environmental), and Profit (economical).
Change towards sustainability asks for change on all three pillars of this triple bottom line. However, the question remains if it is necessary in all cases to give each of the three pillars an equal amount of attention or would that lead to non-realizable situations.

Project managers also have to ask themselves what the scope of sustainability is within their projects. Is the scope limited to the deliverables of the project, or does it concern more and does it also relate to the organization within which the project takes place? And are project managers able to integrate sustainability within the project’s objectives and deliverables and in the project process? Silvius et al. (2010) say that the impact of sustainability is not really recognized yet. The way projects are managed, measured and reported does not reflect the different aspects of sustainability that can be derived from the concepts of sustainable development.

But then, what is sustainability? Sustainability is not a simple issue to grasp. Essentially it is not a methodology but a thinking dimension (Jaafari 2007). Alzami (2010) describes sustainability as each of us doing our part to build the kind of world – economically, environmentally and socially – that we want to live in, and one that we want our children and grandchildren to inherit. It means becoming aware of all interconnections – visible and invisible – in which our day-to-day choices affect the intricate balance of social, economic and ecological systems.

Thus, sustainability has to do with the use of resources that will not be exhausted over a reasonable period and that a system or process must not generate pollution. Furthermore, a definition of a project, OGC (2002) gives two definitions of a project:

1. A management environment that is created for the purpose of delivering one or more business products according to a specific Business Case.

2. A temporary organization that is needed to produce a unique and predefined outcome or result at a pre-specified time using predetermined resources.

It is therefore assumed that a project is a temporary organization created for the purpose of delivering a unique and predefined outcome at a pre-specified time and within predetermined resources.

Within projects, the project sponsor is ultimately responsible for the project. He provides the finances, provides direction on the content of the project and ensures that the attention is kept focussed on the business justification (Hermarij 2010). This means that the project sponsor is also responsible for incorporating sustainability in the content and the business justification. The project manager takes responsibility for all activities necessary to provide the project deliverables (Hermarij 2010). This would imply that the project manager can incorporate sustainability within his project management process. To what extend is able to do so? Are there parts of the project management process where his influence is the biggest and in which the smallest? The research question is defined as follows:

What influence does a project manager have on the way sustainability is implemented in the project and in the project management process?

Approach

This chapter is based on a literature study and a case study. For this research, a case study seems appropriate because the main purpose is to show whether or not a project manager does have influence on the implementation of sustainability within the project management process. Little literature on this topic is yet available. This paper tries to contribute to the discussion which project management roles have what influence on aspects
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