Evidence vs. Pragmatism: Unresolved Conflict between Two Construction Management Paradigms for Contingency Project Environments

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ABSTRACT

This study explores two construction execution and management models for construction and infrastructure development in a new era of fiscal austerity in the face of unplanned, yet devastating natural or man-made disasters. One model explores the role and application of evidence-based construction management, while the other studies the role of the pragmatic approach to construction management in the context of existing cultures and emergent, or dynamic project circumstances. Responses from subject matter experts from two representative dynamic construction and infrastructure development areas (Nigeria and Afghanistan) are evaluated for insights. This research combined expert opinions with time-tested approaches for efficient infrastructure project, procurement, and execution in emergent circumstances of man-made or natural disaster management. While one of the two development strategies is based on performance criteria such as cost, quality and time efficiencies, the other is based on the utilitarian value of a pragmatic juxtaposition of driving social, political and environmental factors. The study is underscored by the notion that while numbers do not lie, they are by their very nature incapable of offering the whole truth.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Construction Management Paradigms, Evidence, Management Models, Nigeria, Pragmatism, Project Environments

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study respondents consisting of construction and infrastructure subject matter experts from Nigeria and Afghanistan concluded the most effective project procurement, and execution approaches for project execution in contingency environments were competitive fixed price, and design–bid–build respectively. However, evidence suggests these two project procurement and delivery approaches have occasioned minimal applications in the very environments whose experts endorsed them.

In a pragmatic effort at the start of the new millennium to build alliances with moderate, and skilled Afghan nationals capable of bringing along the mainstream of the Afghan population, the US through its agencies, and
the World Bank have collaborated with friendly Afghans through a concerted effort of capacity development such as is attainable through local involvement in the construction and infrastructure development process. However, a less than optimal management of the process appears to diminish its import, and affects the entire system of construction contract award, and project delivery, thus, suggesting a need to consider other models for local infrastructure development.

The same pragmatism was noted by Olatunji (2008) that before the start of the national government’s due process policy for contract procurement, projects in Nigeria encountered a variety of problems. The challenges had a negative image effect on the Nigerian government and other deleterious project effects often leading to failure. According to Olatunji, these problems included cost escalation, poor quality of completed work, project abandonment etc. Despite the laudability of this pragmatism by the Western governments in Afghanistan, and the Nigerian leadership, there is a paucity of evidence to suggest its efficacy in terms of quality and timely project deliveries. On the contrary, the landscapes of Nigeria and Afghanistan are littered with abandoned projects of dubious rationales. Evidence of these obvious failures has failed to modify project management behaviors of relevant contract procurement agencies.

According to Pfeffer and Sutton (2006), evidence-based management (EBMgt) practice emanates from the premise that using better, deeper logic; employing facts to the extent possible permits leaders to do their jobs better. Evidence-based management relies on the notion that facing the facts about what works and what does not, understanding the dangerous half-truths that constitute so much conformist wisdom about management, and rejecting dogmatic misinformation that too often passes for sound advice will help organizations perform better.

2. BACKGROUND

For this study, dynamic project environment defines one in which project conditions are not predictable. Unpredictable project conditions may include unsteady legal and security conditions; a condition of political upheaval, natural or man-made disasters such as war; as well as conditions in which ethical and technological immaturities exist. Examples abound in many developing and emerging countries such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Africa, and Brazil. From a scholarly perspective, this inquiry comprises a dual Delphi study approach involving the conduct of independent concurrent and parallel qualitative studies in different cultural constructs, and bringing the results together to seek commonalities in responses from participants.

From a management perspective, these authors will seek to illustrate cross-cultural evidentiary and pragmatic factors necessary for attaining optimal project efficiencies. Project efficiency for the purpose of this study, is defined as the completion of construction projects and attaining primary sponsor mandates within their contracted budgets, contract periods of performance, and specified work scope, and quality. Due to a dearth of studies on the efficacy of evidence-based management (EBMgt) practice in the construction field, scholars and practitioners in the field often resort to quantitative-based studies and subjective management practices respectively. Briner et al. (2009) saw EBMgt as a practice conducted by practitioners, while explaining the role of scholars, is to provide critical infrastructure for its implementation. Briner et al. concur that though the term EBMgt is a new one, the notion of applying research evidence to aid organizational strategies in not. The authors position is similar to those of Reay, Berta and Kohn (2009, p.19) that EBMgt is a “family of practices, not a single rigid formulaic method of making organizational decisions.
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