

SOME ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND DILEMMAS TO CONSIDER WHILE MANAGING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that contemporary business executives have judged business ethics to be indispensable to smooth business growth. This is not just about the long term gains that good business is bound to bring, but also for the sense of 'goodness' that ethical business restores. Since development organizations and projects alike provide important environments for the implementation of business ethics, this work therefore thrives to unearth some of the potential ethical dilemmas that may arise in the various phases of development projects, as well as a recommendation of ethical principles that may be useful in tackling those dilemmas. The method of research employed here is normative in approach; and it operated through reflective equilibrium, analysis and evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics broadly speaking is the study of right and wrong actions. Relating it to the concept of morality, the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy submits that ethics is "used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group or individual" (Deigh, J. 1995). It refers to the moral choices people make and the way in which they seek to justify these choices.

In recent times, a good number of professionals both in the academia and business alike have judged the resources of ethics as being useful enough to apply to practical business environments and issues. In the field of philosophy for instance, this is studied under the topic of business ethics, and it involves using normative principles to determine which business practices are good or bad, and so should be encouraged. Development projects represent a good example of business activity in which the resources of business ethics can be applied. Although one could contest the status of development organizations as not being business as such since they are often not for-profit; but this however, will be possible only if one neglects the broader aim of business which is not just to make profits, but to satisfy consumer needs with goods and services (Ezeibe A.B.C, 2011).

A more important reason why development organizations should adopt ethical codes while implementing their projects is premised on the fact that since development organizations aim to improve lives as well as change the world through projects which is ipso facto good, they therefore have the moral responsibility to achieve this loving end with a means that is altogether GOOD! However, to achieve these ends in the most loving way, one needs to be armed with powerful tools to work out the good means himself. What follows therefore are some ethical principles and frameworks one could use in tackling some moral dilemmas that may crop up in different phases of development projects.

2. THEORIES FOR THE MORAL EVALUATION OF DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

There are often two major ways of thinking about business practices/or project management in the moral sense. First is from the point of view of the results a particular practice, decision or act can have; while the second approach rests squarely on the goodness of an act itself and the unconditional intention to do that good. The first approach is called consequentialism, while the second is deontology (Amrendra K. & Nirbhay K. 2018).

Though resting on Jeremy Bentham's idea of utility, consequentialist theories of ethics can be interpreted from different perspectives of utility, such as rule utilitarianism, act utilitarianism, hedonism, etc. Irrespective of the variants of interpretation, the consequentialist approach to moral judgments demands that on the average, our moral choices should be guided by the action which has the tendency of producing the highest happiness for the greatest number of people. This reasoning is premised on the assumption that happiness is the only fundamental interest of human beings (Mill J.S. 1863 & 1987).

On the other hand, deontology as chaired by Immanuel Kant, orders that the maxims of a moral action be in conformity with the moral law, whereby the law itself is nothing but a representation of the universality of that maxim. Put in simple language, deontology requires that a moral action be performed for the sake of our duty to do good, while the goodness of our actions lies entirely on the universality of the principles of those actions. Other things being equal, Kant formulated the imperatives of morality in the following ways: "I ought never to act except in a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law". Standing on the foundation that humans are autonomous entities capable of giving themselves laws they can live by, and therefore ends in themselves, Kant reformulates the moral law thus: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, never as means only but always at the same time as an end" (Kant I., ed. 1998:38).

With the above theories in mind, the project manager working in development contexts can now resolve some ethical dilemmas more confidently than he would otherwise do. However, it should be noted that actual ethical dilemmas in development projects are often more challenging and unique in such a way that a simple moral command "thou shall not lie", may be unfruitful in resolving such problems in a single swoop. Therefore, the project manager is advised to employ the approach that is more persuading in any situation where the determination of right and wrong may be unclear.

Here below is an attempt of how the project manager may possibly resolve some ethical dilemmas that can crop up in the various phases of development projects.

3. PROJECT DPRO PHASES, POSSIBLE ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS

In the project Dpro guide as developed by PM4NGOs, we were told that development projects often revolve around five phases; namely: identification/definition, project set-up, planning, implementation and project closure. We learned further that each of these phases involve a lot of activities—both direct and indirect works; and like every other endeavour aimed at delivering services or products, development projects are prone to encounter moral issues as much as they are prone to legal issues. Therefore, we examine below how we can possibly respond to potential moral problems that may arise at each phase of development projects.

3.1. Identification and Definition Phase

This phase involves mostly the identification and definition of the project's needs and problems. It therefore provides contexts in which ethical issues can arise. In donor projects for instance, project needs are often identified by the donor who now invites the project manager to validate these needs and implement the project accordingly. However, it is seen that donors are often not as versed as project managers in the accurate identification and analysis of project needs; so in cases where the donor has unintentionally exaggerated the project problems and needs, project managers are often tempted to inflate figures in order to get all the money the donor is willing to donate. Some project managers often justify this act on the grounds that such misrepresentations provide the opportunity to leverage resources, especially as some projects often do not get as much funding as they require for adequate implementation. However, a project manager that is faced with such dilemma may have to weigh his actions using the principles set out by consequentialist and deontological theories of ethics. Using the consequentialist approach for instance, the project manager may ask himself: Will my actions (maybe, in this situation)—to inflate figures in order to acquire all the money a donor is willing to donate—produce the highest happiness for the greatest number? On the other hand, if deontology appeals more to the project manager, he may then ask himself: Can I will it that my maxim—to falsify data in order to acquire all the money a donor is willing to donate—become a universal law for all? OR: Will I by my action, as described above, treat humanity as a means and not an end which it is?

The answer one arrived at after these thought experiments should then guide his choices. However, one can also decide to view his choices within the double lens of consequentialism and deontology altogether. In this case, that which can maximize happiness for the greatest number could as well not flow from duty. So, unless the two elements of duty and happiness are in balance, one should resist to act! This more encompassing approach to moral evaluation of project activities is recommended by the author.

3.2. Set-up Phase

This phase which prepares the project team for the actual planning of the project, involves activities that can raise moral concerns. During risk identification for instance, the project manager might be tempted to overlook risks posed by inadequate team capacity due to favouritism and the likes. In the same vein, the project manager may, while considering cost, accept or mitigate a risk that should altogether be avoided, thereby putting the project team on harm's way. This is often noticeable in humanitarian projects operating in conflict settings, where the cost of using CBOs to implement projects may be higher/or ineffective than using main staff of the organization.

Another potential ethical dilemma worthy of mention in the set-up phase is that presented by the problem of transparency while setting up stakeholder engagement strategies. Sometimes, project managers do feel the need not to disclose all information about the intricacies of the project, especially to project beneficiaries due to reasons spanning from culture, nature of project, etc. For these reasons, project managers often intentionally withhold vital project information, offer misleading statements to stakeholders, or even employ communication channels that allow the stakeholders only minimal knowledge of project parameters. It is advised therefore, that the project manager reconciles his decisions in this regard with ethical principles as set out by the ethical models we pointed out above, and also with the situation in question.

3.3. Project Planning Phase

As the main phase where the modalities of project implementation are determined, the planning phase presents important environment where moral dilemmas can easily crop up in development projects. During resource estimation for instance, the project manager may due to cost, budget lesser number of machineries and manpower for a project that is operating under an extremely tight schedule/or that requires more hands than available, thereby overburdening the project team with numerous works. Also, during MEAL planning, the project manager may be tempted to recommend an evaluator he has personal connections with so as to influence the evaluation process and then safeguard his image against future contracts and donations. In addition to these, ethical dilemma could equally get in the way while planning for procurement of materials and manpower, as the decisions of the project manager in these regards may be influenced by favouritism rather than competency, etc. Also, some project managers often throw sustainability plan overboard with the aim to move on with their lives upon project completion; by the way, they (project managers) will be appraised mostly with the immediate outcome of the project and not its long-term utility. However, decisions in these regards often beg for ethical re-evaluation, the guidelines of which we have already set out in this work.

3.4. Project Implementation Phase

A number of ethical issues can arise at the implementation phase of a project. For instance, while managing budgets, the project manager may realize that their project is under budget, and hence provides a wonderful opportunity to divert the budget leftovers for his personal gains. Also, the level of transparency and honesty the project manager applies to the accountability components of his project can equally raise some moral eyebrows. In addition, it is noticeable that project managers using the real-time evaluation technique may be tempted to influence the evaluation results in order to gain favour in the eyes of their organizations/or donors. The same thing can be said of procurement activities where the project manager may be tempted to favour vendors and suppliers based on personal gains or factors other than competency and quality of service, etc. However, one is advised to think about his decisions in these regards through the lens of moral principles presented by the consequentialist and deontological theories of ethics.

3.5. Project Closure

Ethical issues can arise in the last phase of development projects as much as they can arise in the first phase. The first point that comes to mind when we think of ethical dilemmas in the closure phase is the unwillingness to plan for sustainability. This is very important as we have been emphasizing since the beginning of this topic, because some project managers often do not see the need for adequate sustainability plan since their works will be appraised mostly with immediate outcomes upon completion of project activities. Other areas that demand moral attention at closure phase include the level of transparency with which the project manager reports project activities during closure and also while sharing lessons. For instance, a project manager may be reluctant to tell the whole truth about lost project assets or even intentionally withhold some information about silly mistakes he made during project implementation, so as to safeguard his image against future opportunities and funding, etc. But this, no doubt, may hinder the knowledge growth of the entire development sector, and may also cause serious harms to the sacred duty of veracity. However, there can be exceptions to every kind of transparency in development projects. Given that some honesty can be harmful (whether to beneficiaries or project life itself), the project manager is therefore advised to always weigh his choices with the parameters set out by both consequentialist and deontological theories, while at the same time making efforts to strike a balance between these theories and the situation in question.

4. CONCLUSION

In all, one may like to keep the ethical values set out by the Project Management Institute's Codes of Ethics in mind while managing development projects. Those ethical values include: Responsibility, Respect, Fairness and Honesty. It is by observing these values and more that we can be confident that we are implementing our projects with the best ethical standards possible. Just as many literatures in business studies confirm (Margolis & Wash, 2003), ethical projects no doubt pay off on the long run; not just because of the fulfillment that doing good brings, but also for the trust that good business gains in the eyes of donors, organizations, beneficiaries and the society at large!

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