

SUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

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Eastlake
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Successful Applications of Project Management Practices in the Nonprofit Sector

Progressive nonprofit organizations know that achieving their strategic goals requires more than good intentions. Despite the unique challenges the nonprofit sector faces when it comes to actually achieving the strategic goals set by their leadership and stakeholders, they are increasingly recognizing the benefits of adopting established project management practices.

While the use of project management practices in the nonprofit sector is not new, it is safe to say that it was not an early adopter, especially when compared to the mature practices seen in fields such as technology, manufacturing, and construction. The message in the following report is two-fold: First, there is nothing inherent to the nonprofit sector that precludes the successful use of project management practices, and secondly, between the PMI Educational Foundation and PMI chapters around the world, and the increase in project management related courses and curriculum being offered by our academic partners, a solid foundation and good momentum are taking project management in the nonprofit sector to the next level. Just by having interest in this topic, you are now part of the momentum!

This report reviews the similarities, differences, strengths, and challenges of applying project management principles and practices in the nonprofit sector, and highlights a few success stories, but first I'd like to tell you about something I experienced recently with a consulting client of mine.

I was in a meeting with the CEO of a large nonprofit agency in North Carolina and his top directors were giving updates on their various current projects and activities. As the meeting progressed, the level of stress in the room was steadily increasing. This went on for some time until finally the CEO couldn't contain himself anymore and he pounded the table and yelled out, "Why does everything around here take so blank-ing long?"

Well, everyone in the room was smart enough to know that actually responding to the question would be, at best, futile. Seasoned project managers could take a couple good guesses as to why things were taking too long. I knew some likely answers to his question but I was smart enough to know that as his consultant, I would wait until after the meeting to talk to him further. More about outcome of this story later!

I've spent over 30 years in the nonprofit trenches and have seen, or made, every mistake in the book but over that time I also learned that I was good at organizing projects, anticipating possible problems, and generally getting work done. Imagine my excitement when I discovered there was something called 'Project Management' and that there were actually hundreds of thousands of other people around the world whose brains worked like mine! Project management was a real thing, not just something in my head that helped me get my work and the work of my organization done. It was at this time I became even more interested in how to organize the work of nonprofit organizations for maximum impact.

The Discipline of Project Management

Jim Collins, the author of 'Good to Great,' was the (inspirational) keynote speaker at the 2015 PMI Mile Hi Annual Symposium in Denver, Colorado. After hearing him, I was prompted to re-read his companion monograph titled 'Good to Great and the Social Sectors.' One of his main points is that for years we have been telling nonprofits that they really need to be more 'business-like,' but this is a mistake because there are some really poorly run businesses out there, as well as the good and great ones. The real message needs to be that to be a great for-profit business or a great nonprofit, 'discipline is key - disciplined planning, disciplined people, disciplined governance, and disciplined allocation of resources.'

Enter Project Management! I have spoken with many people from PMI chapters and educational foundations, as well as people from universities, all working to develop project management in the nonprofit sector and find that my experiences are similar to theirs. To move from having a couple project management Rock Stars on staff to an enterprise-wide culture of project management, direction from leadership is key. We also know that one-size-does-not-fit-all, you start with the pieces that are most needed and then customize them to meet the needs of the organization. Many PMI chapters work with nonprofit organizations to bring project management tools and techniques to their projects and operations. The PMI Puget Sound chapter has developed a comprehensive project management training program and offers customized templates on its website. One member of this chapter reports that in his experience of bringing project management to nonprofits, you need a combination of training, consulting, and mentoring – intensive engagements - to be successful but that the project management maturity pathway is similar to that of the for-profit sector.

Areas of Focus

Currently, there are roughly 1.5 million nonprofit and not-for-profit organizations in the United States and they come in all types, shapes, and sizes. Here we will focus on the nonprofit tax classification of 501 (c) 3, which is what most of you think of as a typical nonprofit organization – one that is often mission driven and community serving, emerging from an unmet need or collective movement. But first, let's acknowledge some of the many other types of nonprofits and not-for-profits.

There are actually 28 other types of 501 (c) nonprofit classifications that cover approximately 360,000 nonprofit entities such as chambers of commerce, recreational clubs, fraternities and sororities, labor unions, condo associations, and even amateur sports leagues. There are also almost 100,000 private foundations that also have nonprofit status. The work of foundations is important to the success of the nonprofit sector but their focus and operations are somewhat different. Finally, there are almost 600,000 nonprofits that are classified as non-reporting, meaning that they are not required to file with the IRS because their annual revenue is less than \$25,000 per year. (Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics) All these other types of organizations could certainly benefit from project management practices, but won't be specifically addressed in this report.

This leaves over 350,000 501 (c) 3s classified as Reporting Public Charities that will be the focus here. (The corresponding numbers in Colorado are 25,000 total nonprofits with 7500 being Reporting Public Charities.) Within this classification, the types of work that these organizations are doing and types of services they are providing are extremely varied, but think of some of the examples that are familiar to us; Food Bank of the Rockies, The Humane Society, The Boys and Girls Clubs, and the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless.

Common examples of projects within nonprofit organizations include fundraising events, capital campaigns, and program development. Since nonprofits come in all shapes and sizes, we can't generalize or take a one-size-fits-all approach – project management tools and practices need to be customized and scaled up or down to meet their needs.

Nonprofit Myths

To propose that there is nothing that stops nonprofits from benefiting from project management, we need to clear up some outdated stereotypes.

True or False? Nonprofits can't make a profit.

This is of course false. Nonprofit organizations really must operate in such a manner to have assets, liquidity, and yes, profit. It's just that any profits go back into programs and not to owners or shareholders. Stakeholders, donors, and your bank expect financial stability today and a nonprofit need enough surplus to take advantage of opportunities that may present themselves and also to invest in its future health. Holding a bake sale to meet a budget shortfall is urban legend. I like the saying, 'Nonprofit is a tax status, not a business model.'

True or False? Nonprofits don't have paid staff.

False! Although volunteers are a critical component of many organizations, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 10% of the nation's private workforce (some 11 million employees) work in the nonprofit sector.

True or False? Nonprofits get most of their funding from foundations.

This is false and actually only roughly 2% of the dollars contributed to the nonprofit community each year come from foundation grants. While private philanthropy as a whole represents roughly 13% of the sector's funding, at least half of all nonprofit funding in the U.S. is from fees for service.

(Source: councilofnonprofits.org/myths-about-nonprofits)

Project Management Comparisons between For-profit Businesses and Nonprofit Organizations

Similarities

It would be too easy to just say that all entities, be they for-profit or nonprofit, should just follow PMBOK and everything will be OK. For the most part this might be true, but we need to keep in mind some important similarities as well as some fundamental differences to be able to better customize project management for nonprofits.

Starting with the project management practices that should be quite similar for both sectors:

- **Alignment** - much is said about the need for activities, goals, and projects to align with the strategic vision for maximum impact. This is true for for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike. What we are doing needs to make sense and fit in with the big picture, especially when resources are limited, which they usually are. Simon Sinek has a great book and Ted Talk called, "Start with Why," which examine the importance of alignment and not losing sight of why your organization exists;
- **Planning** – It is not surprising that almost half of the processes in the PMBOK Knowledge Areas are in the Planning Group. I don't need to preach to the choir. For-profits and nonprofits alike need to see the value in planning and work to be good at it! Everyone can argue that they are too busy for planning or planning meetings but organizations that don't acknowledge the importance of focused and productive planning end up with a train that is off the track before it even leaves the station;
- **Resource Management** – Regardless of the sector, resources need to be planned, identified, acquired, and managed. Team members need to be held accountable for managing resources and have good working knowledge of how risk management and scope management tie in closely. The Triple Constraint is a real thing – not just a graphic in text books;
- **Communication** – Everyone agrees that project communication is important but how many organizations are actually good at it? By being

good at it, I mean being disciplined at it – having actual communication plans for projects that outline the ‘who, what, when, and hows.’ Sometimes it’s the smaller organizations that discount the importance of communication plans because they may be working side-by-side most team members daily.

Differences

Although the over-arching message is that, regardless of the sector, project management practices are more alike than they are different, there are a few clear differences that need to be understood. Just to be clear, these differences are not roadblocks, we just need to understand them so we can work around them and best customize what the nonprofit needs.

- **Measuring Return on Investment** – It is often said that nonprofits have a double bottom line but it may be even more complicated than that because measuring true outcomes, or impact, is often subjective or anecdotal. Literacy programs can measure outputs such as how many students participate in their programs and their reading grade levels or how many volunteer hours were donated, but how do you actually measure the impact that increased literacy has for those students and society as a whole in terms of increased employment rates, increased wages, increased self-image, or decreased dependence on welfare? Jim Collins touches on this also when he says that nonprofits need to ‘rigorously assemble the evidence of outcomes, whether they are qualitative or quantitative.’ Nonprofit annual reports and websites today routinely tell impactful stories in addition to just the financials;
- **Resource Constraints** – Constraint in this context doesn’t mean restrained by limited resources, but rather, the constraints that funders, government, and donors may put on the usage of resources. Most funding is tied to very specific use which can limit flexibility. Additionally, there is a growing debate today on how nonprofit overhead should be regarded. The amount of overhead, which can be described as the indirect costs associated with delivering the mission, has long been used as a measure of how responsible a nonprofit is with its funding but this is changing and rightly so! Impact and effectiveness should be the important measures, not just the proportion of an organization’s budget devoted to overhead. It costs real dollars to produce real impact! The National Council of Nonprofits and Guidestar have taken lead roles in working with nonprofits on how to educate funders and donors about the true costs of delivering services. Along these same lines is the powerful Ted Talk by Dan Pallotta titled, “The Way We Think of Charity is Dead Wrong.” One of the good

points he makes is that when the focus is on direct vs. indirect costs, nonprofits are rewarded for how little they spend, not for what they get done.

In this light, we can understand that when the costs associated with project management are lumped into the category of overhead, nonprofits might be hesitant to allocate much of the budget to it;

- **Risk Tolerance** – tying in with the two previous points, it should come as no surprise that nonprofits have been conditioned to have a low risk tolerance. Nonprofits are expected to be good stewards of their public or donor funding and behave responsibly by playing it safe and not taking big risks or being too speculative. But we have been seeing a shift in the 'risk appetite' of some nonprofits, that being the amount of risk an organization is willing to take in pursuit of value. One example is more of what I call 'R&D incubators' within the nonprofit. The board and leadership have full knowledge and buy in on the need to innovate in a safe way and agree to earmark a safe amount of resources for projects that could be considered speculative.

Strengths and Challenges for Nonprofit Organizations while Using Project Management to Achieve their Strategic Missions

I've already taken the position that there is nothing inherent about nonprofit organizations that precludes them from benefiting from project management, but as you continue your work with nonprofit organizations, either professionally or personally, and keep the momentum going, you'll want to understand the strengths and build on them and also acknowledge the challenges so you can work around them.

Strengths

- **Mission Driven** – Since it is common for nonprofits to come into being at a grassroots level, people banding together to address an unmet need in their community, there is typically a strong **commitment** to the cause. While for-profits might be good at telling you what they do and how they do it, nonprofits are usually pretty good at telling you why they do what they do.

Another strength of nonprofits that supports their efforts toward achieving the mission with the use of project management is that staff and volunteers are likely **subject matter experts** already, which is often the case with grassroots organizations. It's not uncommon to find people working or volunteering for nonprofits that serve groups for which they are, or were, members such as cancer survivors, veterans, or people who were previously homeless.

Generally, nonprofits have the **support** of public opinion encouraging their efforts. Society is rooting for them! Rarely do you hear people say they are against ending homelessness, against developing youth enrichment programs, or against finding cures for diseases. The nonprofit's successful outcomes are of interest to society as a whole;

- **Innovative by Nature** – it's true that the nonprofit sector is not often looked to for the most cutting-edge inventions, practices, or technology, but they tend to be quite innovative in several other ways. People working in the nonprofit sector can be quite **resourceful** – having to constantly figure out

how to do more with less can force creative problem solving and out-of-the-box solutions. Long before any of us heard of Uber, I met someone from an agency in rural Maine that found employment for people with disabilities. Finding the jobs wasn't a problem, but finding transportation was difficult because they had no public transportation system or even taxis. This organization built a network of people in the community that provided rides on a pay-per-ride basis.

Along these same lines, we are seeing much more **entrepreneurial** behavior from nonprofits. For many years, nonprofit boards have been discussing the importance of shifting away from their total reliance on public funding and fundraising and toward newer models for generating revenue. It is quite common now for nonprofits to generate revenue by selling a product or services. They can either do this independently or partner with for-profit businesses who are interested in increasing their own social impact. In some cases, the method of generating the income may actually be structured as a for-profit subsidiary in order to protect the tax-exempt status of the parent company, the nonprofit.

Along with new ways of thinking about how to solve social problems, we're seeing an increase in nonprofit mergers, acquisitions, or just an increase in **collaboration** and partnerships in general. When funding and other resources are diminishing, there can be increased competition between nonprofits but there can also be strength in numbers and economies of scale. (As a side-note, organizations that decide to merge with others really need the guidance of a project manager.)

Challenges

While examining some of the challenges nonprofits face when executing their strategies, it's not surprising that some of them mirror the sector differences discussed earlier. The challenges are legitimate but they don't have to stop us from applying project management practices by customizing them to meet the needs of the organization. Understanding the challenges is the first step to minimizing them and thriving despite the forces working against the organization and against you as the project manager.

- **Capacity Reality** – Keeping projects on schedule is one of the most common frustrations in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors alike, but there are some common factors that often apply additional pressures in the nonprofit sector.

For example, nonprofits are routinely juggling competing **priorities**. The same staff members are typically responsible for both operations and projects and it is very hard to step out of the day-to-day and look at the bigger picture. We tend to be 'Crisis Junkies,' very good at the 'All Hands on Deck' so it is no surprise that this type of culture leaves projects on the back burner.

Remember the CEO who liked to pound his fists on the table? We were able to take a closer look at priorities and resource allocation. He actually had a very high performing team but they were all running at 130% and it was unrealistic to think that more could be getting done. He knew they were all very busy but the number of hours in a day are finite and the continual 'piling on' without regard to true capacity would eventually result in stalled projects, not to mention burn-out.

We also know that **resources** are often limited within nonprofit organizations which, not surprisingly, can contribute to difficulty keeping projects on schedule. Excessive workloads and the inability to pay competitive wages eventually lead to turnover, which leads to decreased efficiency and effectiveness, and often, stalled projects. Despite this, Jim Collins, in the same monograph discussed earlier says, "Lack of resources is no excuse for lack of rigor" He is referring to getting the right people in the right seats on the bus even if financial resources are limited. It's difficult, but nonprofits should resist believing that having limited resources is an excuse to accept substandard performance.

Another challenge that nonprofits can face related to their capacity and the use of project management, is complying with **regulations** that in many cases, amount to unfunded mandates. For example, to use volunteers, agencies in Illinois providing services for people with disabilities need to conduct 11 different background checks and provide 40 hours of classroom training and 80 hours of on-the-job training prior to letting the volunteer begin. These are the same requirements for hiring paid employees but essentially make the use of volunteers cost prohibitive. Nonprofit organizations are also often subjected to overly burdensome reporting requirements and other archaic rules which affect their overall capacity to get stuff done, in other words, meaningful outcomes;

- **Project Management Maturity Gap** – Continuing with the premise that the project management maturity pathway is similar for for-profit and nonprofit organizations, there are some general areas or reasons why many nonprofits might still be at an earlier place on the continuum.

One reason is that many nonprofits, especially small and mid-sized ones, may view project management as too **complex** for what they are trying to accomplish but they are missing the point. It feels like extra work if you don't see the benefits. Project management methodologies help organizations make better use of limited resources because, becoming more efficient ultimately increases capacity. Herding cats take lots of energy! This being said, remember that one size does not fit all and while you may be looking at the big picture of project management, you'll want to start with the pieces that seem most important, sell the value of the practices, and scale them up or down to meet the needs of the particular nonprofit. Guard against too many tools or too many processes at the beginning, but start somewhere!

Some nonprofit organizations, especially smaller or newer ones, don't yet see the importance of recognizing and managing their **organizational assets** and may be weak in the areas of knowledge management and formal lessons learned.

The first pounding CEO knew that he was fortunate to have a couple 'rock stars' on the team, but he learned that he was exposing his organization to a big risk to let all of this institutional knowledge live in a few people's heads. Sure, they had a policy and procedure manual but it was pretty stagnant. Developing program manuals and user manuals, and routinely updating them, served to both preserve this knowledge as well as make employee training much more effective. They were also able to get much more disciplined about documenting lessons learned as part of this process.

Finally, it shouldn't be assumed that nonprofit organizations are less tech-savvy than their for-profit counterparts, but their use of **technology** might seem a bit behind the times, especially to project managers! In my experience, staff, and especially younger staff are very comfortable and knowledgeable about technology but resources tend to be the limiting factor. We know that human and financial resources are needed to purchase or design, implement, update, upgrade, and tie various systems or software together can be huge projects themselves. Eventually though, the costs (or pain) of using outdated technologies and equipment can be crippling. I recently worked with a large nonprofit with 38 program sites in four states and being so spread out, they had recognized the need to make full use of Office 365 and SharePoint for reporting, document storage and sharing, and team collaboration. They had 14 FTEs in their technology department which was very expensive but they had committed to the expense knowing it was essential to their short-term and long-term impact.

Project Management in Action in the Nonprofit Sector

As with businesses within other fields, some can be considered to be early adopters and advanced users, while others are only just beginning to understand the benefits of incorporating project management practices at their organizations. Three nonprofit organizations with well-developed project management cultures and their reported benefits are highlighted below.

Rocky Mountain MicroFinance Institute – Denver, CO – rmmfi.org

RMMFI provides **learning, lending, and coaching** to grow Community Entrepreneurs who build businesses to advance along the pathway to **self-sufficiency** and **self-worth**. Reported highlights and benefits:

- Balance between projects and operations – annual planning at RMMFI includes a calendar of upcoming projects and recurring events so schedules can be set accordingly. The leadership at RMMFI tries to not introduce too many new projects outside of the quarterly status meetings to guard against a continual shift of resources away from unfinished projects or operations;
- Scheduling and resource planning – RMMFI treated the addition of a new FTE position as a project itself. This allowed it to take a mindful approach to the job description, the best ways to onboard, and outline the most impactful allocation of time and duties;
- Measuring results – benchmarks and key results still need to be met (outputs) but RMMFI also does the extra work on each project to show that actual value was produced (outcomes). It's not enough to measure how many entrepreneurs complete their program, but also qualify the associated quality of life benefits such as increased self-sufficiency, jobs creation, meaningful income, and the attainment of dreams.

While the use of project management practices brings an increased accountability to RMMFI's work teams, they also feel they serve as role-models for their clients who are themselves learning efficient, business-minded practices.

Finally, RMMFI received the 2016 Small Nonprofit of the Year award from the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce.

Washington Initiative for Supported Employment – Seattle, WA – gowise.org

WISE promotes **Equitable Employment** for People with **Developmental Disabilities** through **Innovation, Training and Technical Assistance**. WISE consults with nonprofit organizations throughout Washington and Oregon that are developing their community-based employment services for people with disabilities (as federal and state funding shifts away from employment services in segregated settings).

The Executive Director of WISE, while looking to ways to increase her organization's impact, connected with her local PMI chapter (Puget Sound) on what became their pilot project. Twelve WISE employees participated in a five-part program spanning nine months which included customized templates and procedures. They are now in their 2nd year of the pilot and have 25-30 different projects in progress at any given time. Reported highlights and benefits are:

- Employee development – Implementing project management practices across the entire organization enhanced employee development in several ways. The Executive Director notes that there is still the same amount of work but that the atmosphere is much less frantic. Employees know who is the lead on each project, know what is due and when, and they now know how to renegotiate time lines when necessary. Additionally, even when internal promotions aren't available, employees continue to have opportunities to develop their skills by running major projects;
- Organizational assets and knowledge transfer – the WISE Executive Director knew that she wanted their institutional knowledge preserved; at first it was important so it could be as efficient and effective as possible, documenting what the organization did, how long it took to do it, how much it cost to do it, etc. This also helped onboard new employees as WISE continued to grow. But the other big benefit of getting better at managing their organizational assets and knowledge transfer comes as WISE is being approached by organizations in other states about providing consulting services and realizes that it is in a much better position to expand if it so chooses;
- Credibility – The organizations that WISE consults with see them as confident and organized, not just as creatives. By using project management tools when they consult with other organizations, WISE's message is not just 'this is how you get people jobs' but, 'this is how to organize your work so your efforts have the most impact.'

Ladies of Virtue – Chicago, IL – lovirtue.org

Ladies of Virtue prepares young women, especially those living in under-served communities, to graduate from high-school equipped for college and a career. Through individualized, peer to peer, and team mentoring, LOV provides participants with unique leadership and project management opportunities to prepare them for complex life and work environments in the 21st century. LOV provides these services with an annual budget of less than \$50,000 showing that organizations of any size can benefit from project management. Reported highlights and benefits:

- Business case for each project to determine alignment – One project management practice in regular use at Ladies of Virtue is the development of a business case for all proposed projects (both for the organization as well as for the girls' projects). There are so many projects that are good ideas that will benefit the community but if they don't align with the strategic direction, or if resources can't be secured, the projects aren't approved;
- Built-in structure for (annual) planning, monitoring and control – The Executive Director of Ladies of Virtue has several years of experience with project management in the healthcare field so she is very familiar with the importance of disciplined planning and execution. When everyone is excited about a project, they want to jump in and get started instead of planning first, but she is able to train and mentor others to avoid this mistake;
- Lessons learned after each project and end-of-year – The process of documenting and analyzing lessons learned should not be cursory. The Executive Director stresses the importance of this, not only for the organization as a whole, but to the young women as they finish their individual projects.

Fostering a project management culture benefits not only the organization but also the young women in the program. The Executive Director feels strongly, and I agree, that the young women are learning about project management early and building on their skills in college which leads to more successful careers as our project managers of tomorrow.

These organizations are not anomalies but they learned about the probable benefits, made the decision to incorporate and are perhaps further along on the maturity pathway than others.

Momentum

If the premise is that discipline is needed to be a great organization, then project management is a logical piece. Project management for the nonprofit sector is off to a good start in so many ways, now momentum is critical.

By building on the work of PMI and its chapters and educational foundations, our education partners, and all the others bringing project management experiences to young people, it is clear that with a little discipline and customization, nonprofits can indeed benefit from project management by capitalizing on strengths and making sure that challenges don't turn into roadblocks.

About the Author

Donna Catalano, MS, PMP, and founder of Eastlake Solutions, provides consulting and training in the areas of project management, change implementation, and process improvement for nonprofit organizations nationally. With a successful 30-year career in nonprofit management, Ms. Catalano brings established project management and change management tools to organizations seeking to maximize their impact, make the most efficient use of their resources, and achieve their strategic goals.

Resources

- Project Management Institute Educational Foundation
 - o 200 scholarships in 2015 to students, teachers, practitioners, nonprofit, and NGO staff around the world to study project management
 - o 2016 Community Advancement Through Project Management Award – deadline 5/20/16
 - o Project Management for Social Good – learning resources
- PMI Chapters/PMIEF Liaison websites – resources and templates developed specifically for nonprofits
- Colorado Nonprofit Association – Principles & Practices for Nonprofit Excellence in Colorado
- Community Resource Center – Colorado Grants Guide
- TechSoup for nonprofit organization – free or low cost PM software

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