Time Management: The Indispensable Force behind Successful Disaster Recovery[1]

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Abstract

Disaster management aims to reduce or avoid potential losses from hazards, assure prompt and appropriate assistance to victims of a disaster, and achieve a rapid and effective recovery. A comparison between the project management process groups and disaster management activities that span all the phases of disaster management indicates that in order to successfully execute a project, the project manager needs to effectively manage time.

Effective time management is critical to the success of any project manager's work, but it is imperative to a disaster recovery project. Achieving properly timed milestones within the scope of a project will deliver the best outcome over its full lifecycle; conversely, poor time management almost certainly will negatively impact the project as a whole. Due to the fact that disaster recovery projects involve multiple, often overlapping timelines and deliverables that must be accomplished with minimal delay, it is imperative that project managers incorporate time management accountability mechanisms into each phase of a project. By examining challenges and lessons learned from real-world, firsthand experiences, project managers will be able to extrapolate best practices in time management that they can apply to their own projects and programs, both in the present with tangible results and in the future.

Introduction

Disaster management aims to reduce or avoid potential losses from hazards, assure prompt and appropriate assistance to victims of a disaster, and achieve a rapid and effective recovery. The disaster management cycle illustrates the ongoing process by which governments, businesses, and civil society plan for and reduce the impact of disasters; react during and immediately following a disaster; and take steps to recover after a disaster has occurred (Warfield, 2005). It is commonly agreed that there is no way of neutralizing all negative impacts resulting from disasters. Efforts can be made, however, to reduce their impacts. In this regard, effective disaster management is a key element in good governance (UN/ISDR, 2002).

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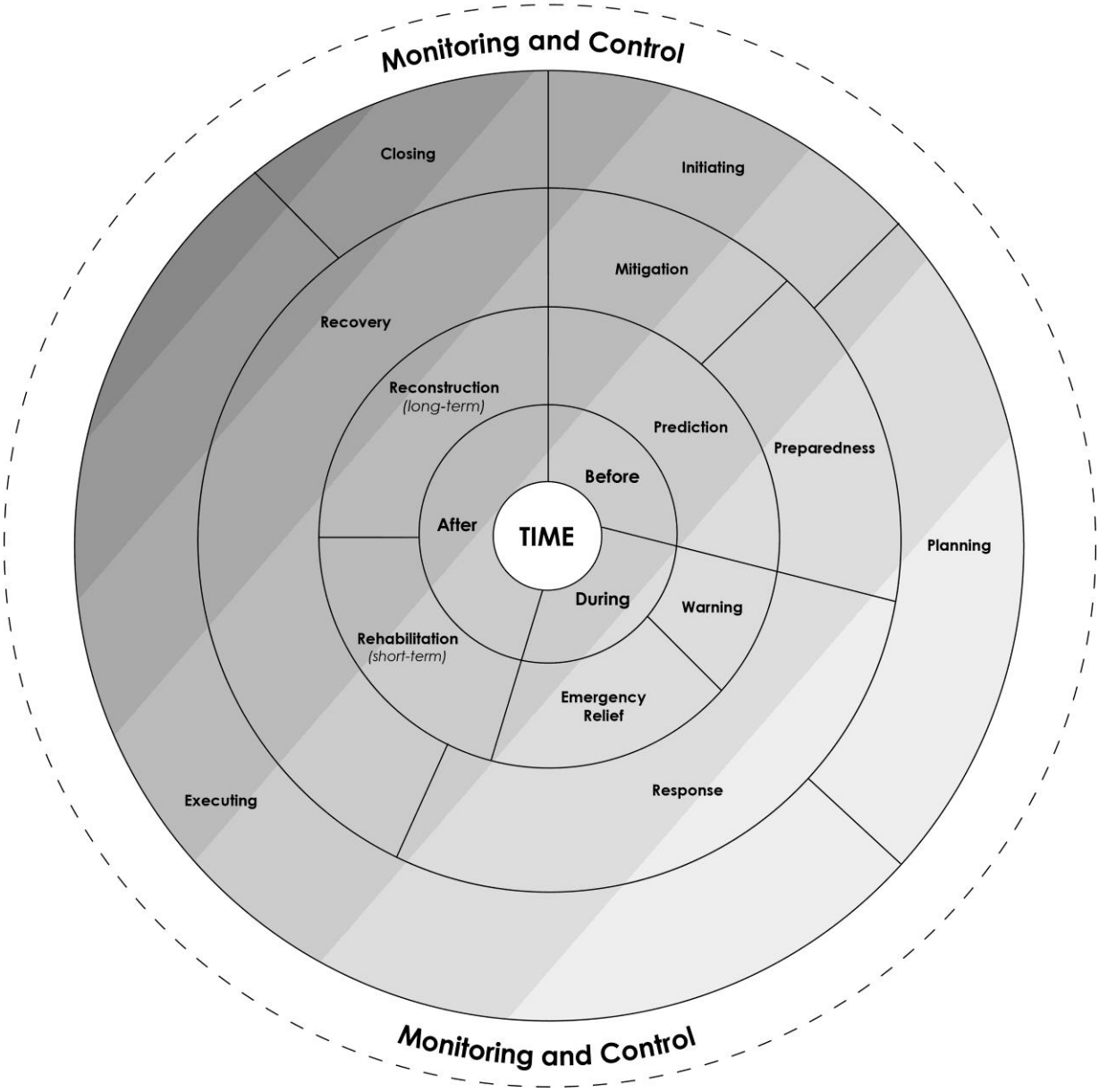

Figure 1. A comparison between project management process groups and disaster management activities. *Source: "An integrated approach to natural disaster management: Public project management and its critical success factors" by Tun Lin Moe and Pairote Pathranarakul in Disaster Prevention and Management, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2006. Published by Emerald Group Publishing Limited.*

Disaster management activities broadly illustrated

Mitigation

Mitigation activities include structural and nonstructural measures undertaken to limit the adverse impact of natural hazards, environmental degradation and technological hazards (Moe et al, 2006). Mitigation ties in well with the preparedness aspects discussed below as federal, state and local governments need the expertise of others that have gone through and survived the devastating aspects of natural disasters. In some situations, however, the best approach might be evacuating people if warnings are issued early enough.

Preparedness

Preparedness includes activities and measures taken in advance to ensure effective response to the impact of hazards, including issuing timely and effective early warnings and temporarily evacuating people and property from threatened locations (Moe et al, 2006). In addition to knowing that a community or an agency has what it needs in case disaster strikes, preparedness also can be tested through drills, exercises and tests. A community's readiness/preparedness has not been put to the test until an actual attack/natural disaster occurs. Preparedness requires deliberate communication between federal, state and local agencies beginning when an emergency or disaster is imminent. For example, relief efforts for victims of Hurricane Sandy were more coordinated than for those of Hurricane Katrina because of the lessons learned, and increased and timely communication between agencies.

Response

Response includes providing assistance or intervening during and immediately following a disaster to meet the life preservation and basic subsistence needs of the people affected. It can be immediate, short-term, or protracted (Moe et al, 2006). During any federally declared natural disaster, most efforts and publicity are usually placed on first response in the early hours of a disaster, where victims and the general public look to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide short-term relief to the victims (White Paper, PMO). How timely this response is in the first 24 hours depends on how prepared FEMA and the affected state and local governments are.

Recovery

According to the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF, 2011), "Recovery begins with pre-disaster preparedness and includes a wide range of planning activities. These include decisions and actions taken after a disaster with a view toward restoring or improving the pre-disaster living conditions of the stricken community while encouraging and facilitating necessary adjustments to reduce disaster-related risk (Moe et al, 2006). The recovery process is best described as a sequence of interdependent and often concurrent activities that progressively advance a community toward a successful recovery. However, decisions made and priorities set early in the recovery process by a community will have a cascading effect on the nature and

speed of the recovery progress (NDRF, 2011). According to Geipel (1982) (as cited by Smith, 2010), communities often frame disaster recovery success as the speed at which they return to a sense of normalcy. According to Olshansky (2006) (as cited by Smith, 2010), a strict adherence to this approach limits the ability of communities to determine a collective vision of the future or integrate sustainable development and disaster resilience principles into recovery. The ability to balance the speed of recovery with effective deliberation is an essential component of planning for post-disaster recovery and benefits from the active involvement of land-use planners.

Why effective time management is imperative in a disaster recovery project or program

The process groups are not project phases (PMBOK 4th Edition, 2008) as disaster management is separated into distinct phases or subprojects as illustrated in Figure 1 above, therefore, all of the process groups would most likely be repeated for each phase and subproject (PMBOK 4th Edition, 2008). In this paper, we seek to broadly define those activities needing the close attention of project managers in order to deliver a successful outcome.

Initiating

Every project manager must appreciate that how well a project is delivered depends largely on how it is started. Authorization of the work to be performed and identification of all stakeholders in a disaster recovery project is very important if the project is to satisfy all the needs of the users. The single most important attribute that leads to failure of any project is poor communication. In the immediate aftermath of the unprecedented Hurricane Katrina, a combination of factors delayed help from reaching its victims, which contributed to additional suffering and damage. The problems were exacerbated by FEMA's sluggish response and lack of coordination with other federal, state and local responders. Moreover, local- and state-level political bickering in Lousiana also hampered the response (USA Today, 2013). Disaster management during the initiation phase has, in the United States, suffered two systemic limitations. The first is the need to coordinate short- and long-term responses, which often span multiple agencies; the second structural problem involves sharing information across agencies and jurisdictions (White Paper, PMO).

Planning

According to the PMBOK (4th Edition, 2008), the planning process group spans a number of knowledge areas. Notable among them is the definition of scope, cost and time management. From the foregoing discussion, scope definition will not always be straightforward in disaster recovery considering the time constraints involved for the various stakeholders. In some instances, a lot of time will be taken just assessing the damage and the amount of work to be done. Disaster-related projects involve grant management, where contractors review and evaluate various applications. Delays in this process often create applicant fatigue. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report #GAO-09-437T, March 2009 (as cited by

White Paper, PMO), "Some applicants in Louisiana told us of the need to repeatedly resubmit key project documents because of the lack of an effective system to share such documentation. This situation was made worse because key federal and state officials responsible for reviewing and approving documentation were not primarily located in the same place." If not properly planned, the application review and initial assessment processes, which can take anywhere from one month to more than five years, will increase applicant fatigue (e.g., the Deepwater Horizon 2010 oil spill disaster).

Ill-defined scope leads to inefficient program delivery. Some scope is too ambitious and unattainable, thus leading to failure to deliver at all. During the Hurricane Sandy recovery efforts, some contractors put down their tools because of time-constraining, unattainable deliverables.

Evaluating long-term needs as opposed to being reactive is paramount. FEMA was mandated to deal with the immediate responses to disasters, and thus was not focused on systems meant for a long-term view. According to Smith et al, (2006) (as cited by Smith, 2010), post-disaster recovery policy in the United States has tended to emphasize administering financial programs that focus on the physical repair of damaged infrastructure and housing. According to Platt (1999) (as cited by Smith, 2010), "In many cases, these funds pay to reconstruct communities that have experienced repeated disaster-related losses. This approach has created disincentives for states and local governments to proactively plan for post-disaster recovery."

Planning communication for the disaster recovery phase is easier said than done, and coordination and communication between multiple federal, state and local governments has not always been easy. According to the GAO Report #GAO-09-129, December 2008, "Federal and state officials acknowledged that they faced difficulties in sharing project information and that documents were sometimes lost during the exchange between their agencies" (White Paper, PMO). Project success in disaster recovery will largely depend on the ability to timely transfer data between program implementers, the applicants and responsible government officials. Accurate information plays a central role in any assistance program, ensuring that families receive the benefits to which they are entitled without duplication or waste (White Paper, DHAP).

Properly constituting a disaster recovery team will help a project manager gauge how efficiently deliverables will be met. As a project manager, let's say you are responsible for managing the reconstruction of a community center; success on this one project in the overall program will depend primarily on how well the other contractors are staffed. Having an overall coordination office in the local community or at the state level will help teams work together and it ensures timely delivery. In the Hurricane Sandy aftermath, New Jersey and New York hired staff from Louisiana to help with their recovery efforts. The assumption here was that the experiences and lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts would be applicable to Hurricane Sandy. By doing this, the program manager assumed that what worked for Hurricane Katrina would work well in the Hurricane Sandy recovery. In short, cooperation among stakeholders and project management practitioners ensures shortened learning curves.

Cost and time are usually talked about in the same breath. Costs are bound to increase in a recovery program because ill-defined scope can lead to scope creep; contractors give up contracts because of a failure to deliver; or deliverables and timelines are too ambitious. Federal disaster management has evolved significantly since Hurricane Katrina. While the magnitude of Hurricane Sandy was greater and affected many more people than Hurricane Katrina, the cost of recovery was significantly lower because officials were better prepared for Hurricane Sandy. Most importantly, fewer lives were lost during Hurricane Sandy as compared to Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Sandy was a very complex event to respond to, but the overall outcome wasn't nearly as bad as Hurricane Katrina because there was much better coordination (USA Today, 2013).

Planning procurements for disaster recovery programs is another area project managers need to closely monitor and control. Affected local communities and states are understandably anxious for recovery work to start quickly in order for them to get back to normal as soon as possible. This desire to get things up and running, however, also tends to bring about additional problems with procurement that could lead to fraud, waste and abuse. An example is when the bidding process for contractors is bypassed in the name of expediency. All too often local officials sidestep mandated procedures in order to expedite the delivery of services. If a contractor's compensation is based on or tied to production or number of hours worked, that contractor would likely be motivated to make decisions that expand the scope of the project (White Paper, Grantee's Armor). In this case, timeliness is no longer a positive driver of effort; instead, the longer the time spent, the more benefit gained by the contractor.

Planning for risk management is very critical. The risks can be legal, physical (e.g., unsafe neighborhoods as a result of flooding, leaking gas and exposed power lines), and contractor- and media-related. Hurricane Katrina recovery was delayed because of considerations of the legal ramifications of the recovery effort (USA Today, 2013). As discussed above, the risks of scope creep also increase. Since most recoveries involve the use of taxpayer dollars, mismanaged projects will most certainly receive a lot of negative publicity.

Executing

Successful execution is contingent on the effectiveness of the initiation and planning phases. It is at this stage that iterations need to be intensified to achieve the right results. In some projects, the team might be forced to go back to the drawing board. During disaster recovery, the executing timeframe could fall between a month and many years ahead. How prepared teams were before the disaster will determine how soon the rehabilitation and reconstruction phases can commence.

Recovery from significant disasters is an inherently long process. Reconstruction projects can take years to repair damage and even longer to deliver improved resilience (Norling, 2013). In addition to the obvious scale of work required, there are various issues in post-disaster reconstruction that affect timely progress. Again, effective time management can provide an opportunity to minimize reconstruction durations (Norling, 2013).

Monitoring and control

According to Olshansky (as cited by Norling, 2013), accountability and transparency are crucial to maintaining trust among those who provide reconstruction funds, those who manage the funds, and those who use those funds in rebuilding. The challenge government entities face is striking a balance between the timely disbursement of funds and providing assurance of transparency. Olshansky, et al (as cited by Norling, 2013) asserts that funders may need to pay now, audit later, or potentially accept a slower reconstruction process. As a project manager, your issues would be whether integrity monitoring should commence immediately, at specific milestones or after the fact (White Paper, Grantee's Armor). Preventing or minimizing the consequences of errors in grant administration requires careful preparation so the organization can identify errors early in the process and take corrective action immediately (White Paper, Grantee's Armor).

This can be accomplished by establishing compliance and monitoring review plans and designating internal teams or functions to monitor grant programs independently with the mindset of the inspector or the auditor. This gives grantees and project managers the greatest chance of discovering problems while they can still be corrected (White Paper, Grantee's Armor).

Time management strategies that will ensure a successful recovery project

Regardless of the disaster management activity in which a project manager is involved, time management is critical to one's ability to deliver a successful recovery project. As such, a successful recovery program delivery from a project manager's point of view will cover the following aspects in the project management knowledge areas:

Scope

As a project manager, it is imperative that you look at the full picture of a disaster recovery effort. Since recovery covers both the rehabilitation (short-term) and reconstruction (long-term) phases, clearly defining "the work and only the work" that needs to be done should happen in as short a time as practical. Proper scope definition and stakeholder identification will occur more smoothly if preparation efforts were shared among government entities, not-for-profits, communities and contractors, among others. Again, Hurricane Sandy provides a good example.

Communication

Timely sharing of information during a disaster recovery will help in timely project delivery as well as mitigate fraud, waste and abuse. Partnerships and collaboration across groups, sectors and government entities promote a successful recovery process. Partnerships and inclusiveness are vital for ensuring that all voices will be heard from all parties involved in the recovery and that all available resources are brought to the table. This is especially critical at the community level, where nongovernmental partners in the private and nonprofit sectors play a critical role in meeting local needs (NDRF, 2011). "Across the country, there's been an evolution at all levels of

government about how we work together, coordinate together and share awareness around the available resources and the gaps in those capabilities" (US Today, 2013).

Human Resource Management

Assembling a team composed of the right resources reduces time spent in executing a disaster recovery effort. In many instances, leveraging project managers that have had prior experience with similar recovery projects helps shorten the learning curve. The example in which New Jersey officials hired teams that had been involved with the Hurricane Katrina recovery is a case in point. This sharing of staff shortens the time required to commence and carry out the recovery efforts.

Cost

In all recovery efforts, some form of government typically will sponsor the project. When disaster recovery funds are appropriated at the federal and state levels, they are usually targeted toward one or more of four major categories: economic development, resiliency planning, infrastructure activities, and housing activities (White Paper, Grantee's Armor). In order for a successful project delivery, project managers should be fully aware of all the requirements and procedures for expending funds. In order to save the time of inspectors and the many officials charged with overseeing the use of public funds, proper internal controls need to be implemented and it is the project manager's duty to confirm that such controls are being followed. Agencies receiving disaster relief funds are required to implement internal controls to ensure that their programs operate in compliance with statutory provisions, the terms and conditions of the funding agreement and the program requirements, and standards set or accepted by the funding agency (White Paper, Grantee's Armor).

Procurement

As discussed earlier, because of the nature of the work required in a disaster recovery effort, it is not uncommon for local officials to bypass mandated procedures in order to expedite service delivery (White Paper, Grantee's Armor). According to (44 C.F.R. S13.36), state and local government procurements should conform to federal government standards and procedures. Since procurement of services and equipment is very important in determining how efficiently a project will be run, the project manager should know beforehand how much and when they will need a given resource to avoid disrupting the progress of the recovery work.

Risk

The ability to identify, manage and control risks as work on a project progresses is essential to project success. In disaster management, the project manager is dealing with real physical risks (e.g., debris and leaking gas), media risks, operational risks (e.g., nonperforming management and information systems), and legal risks in which the grantee or project administration might face legal action should any of their deliverables not meet specified requirements. Project managers need to monitor and control risks as often as they arise and mitigate them as necessary.

Taking control over risks requires frequent reviews of potential and identified risks by the project team.

Quality

Quality management should be built into the general project delivery. A project manager should endeavor to satisfy all stakeholder needs, avoid and prevent rework, and encourage continuous improvement. Improvement of service delivery in disaster recovery should make use of lessons learned from other disaster recovery projects. In a bid to produce timely results or meet the project schedule, the project manager should always ensure that quality is maintained. In certain projects, this might require that the project manager and the team, in general, rethink a way forward to avoid costs of quality (e.g. having to tear down and rebuild an office block) that might arise long after the project is completed.

Integration

Integration brings it all together. Since disaster recovery cuts through federal, state and local governments, information needs to be shared in a timely and accountable manner. Transparency and coordination among all parties will ensure successful program delivery. A project management office at the federal government level and satellite offices in all states and in some departments go a long way in curbing delays in program delivery (White Paper, PMO). "Across the country, there has been an evolution at all levels of government about how we work together, coordinate together and share awareness around available resources and the gaps in those capabilities." (USA Today, 2013). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which is charged with monitoring community development block grants (CDBG funds), has set up an office that is responsible for managing disaster recovery efforts.

Conclusion

The disaster management activities discussed above and the project management process groups mirror each other well in assisting a project manager responsible for any disaster recovery effort. Understanding the critical nature of effective time management at all stages usually determines the success achieved.

According to the NDRF (2011), the ability of a community to accelerate the recovery process begins with its efforts in pre-disaster preparedness, mitigation and recovery capacity building. These efforts result in a resilient community with an improved ability to withstand, respond to and recover from disasters. Timely decisions in response to disaster impacts can significantly reduce recovery time and costs.

A successful recovery process upholds the value of timeliness and flexibility in coordinating and efficiently conducting recovery activities and delivering assistance. It also minimizes delays and loss of opportunities. The process strategically sequences recovery decisions and promotes coordination; addresses potential conflicts; builds confidence and ownership of the recovery

process among all stakeholders; and ensures that recovery plans, programs, policies and practices are adaptable to meet unforeseen, unmet and evolving recovery needs (NDRF, 2011).

As required by the closing process group of project management, the project manager should ensure that there is closure of the project. In a disaster recovery, the willingness and ability to share lessons learned does help in building the body of knowledge in managing such projects for future project managers.

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Brenda N. Yombo, MBA, PMP is a Senior Consultant with CohnReznick Advisory group-Government Services. Brenda has over 12 years of project management, accounting and consulting experience. Brenda has worked on a number of projects providing support and as project Manager. Currently she serves as a team member on the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Mark-to-Market Multifamily project, a multi-million dollar project analyzing Audited Financial Statements, liaising with HUD Project Managers, property owners and OAHP officials. She also works with the compliance monitoring team on the Illinois Disaster Recovery program (IDRP) testing grants provided to grantees and the work performed on various projects to rebuild Chicago after the IKE disaster. She also assists on various consulting projects in the CohnReznick Advisory Group (CRAG) - Government Services team.

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Presently, James coordinates integrity monitoring activities and oversees anti-fraud, waste and abuse initiatives for the State of New Jersey's Department of Community Affairs in its disaster recovery efforts to heal from Hurricane Sandy. Previously, James served as the compliance review monitor for HUD's Mark-to-Market (M2M) program; currently, he manages direct mortgage portfolios for M2M. His previous experience includes providing litigation consulting, forensic accounting, and project management support to the Department of Interior's Office of Historical Trust and Accounting in the single largest class action lawsuit levied against the federal government.

James has the unique ability to plan, implement, and manage large-scale government contracts, programs and database administration, IT support, and budgets while tempering risks, oversight, and resolving issues under strict time constraints. His success in pursuing and securing new Firm business opportunities is a result of his "ambassador-style" management approach which sets and maintains a positive tone throughout the lifecycle of each project he leads.

James has a B.A., Economics (with a Specialization in Financial Markets) from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and holds the following certifications: Certified Fraud Examiner (CFE), Project Management Professional (PMP) and Certified Internal Controls Auditor (CICA). Professional affiliations include the Project Management Institute (PMI) and Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE). He is actively involved with District Sports, Soccer based non-profit who raises money and awareness through soccer leagues in the District of Columbia to promote community development. James can be contacted at james.degenova@cohnreznick.com