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# Project Management - Pandemic and Beyond <sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Now that we are witnessing a decrescendo in the Covid19 cases, and with the Covid protocols being lifted worldwide, life is returning to normalcy, let us take a helicopter view of what all Pandemic Covid19 has taught us that has made us a little wiser.

We all have gone through a torrid time during Covid19 clubbed with the recent geopolitical tensions, unprecedented spikes in commodity prices, and supply chain issues which have made our lives a little more difficult affecting the way we work and the way, we live. The impact for some has been very high, some are still reeling under the threats and coping up with the build-up of anxiety levels. Today, the new reality is that crisis and disruption are here to stay, we need to adopt newer ways to survive and thrive in the changing world. Moreover, every crisis/situation/event teaches us something new and imparts us some important life lessons which collectively are termed as our experiences, here too, the challenging times have added a few more tools and techniques to our toolbox.

Above all, it is well-known fact that how we use the lessons learned determines the end results which separate the men from the boys.

This paper brings out the key lessons and how these have helped us during the execution of the projects.

## **End Result**

Challenges are only temporary and testing times do not last long. In a dynamic world, conventional ways of working do not yield the same results achieved in past, innovativeness is the key to success. Think, Observe & Manage (TOM) is the mantra for not only surviving in the VUCA world but also a key enabler to thrive in the days to come.

**Key Words:** Innovative, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Stakeholders, Project Success, Project Leaders

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Nomenclature: **EI** – Emotional Intelligence, **EWS** – Early Warning Signals, **LD** – Liquidity Damages, **PM** – Project Manager, **PL** – Project Leader, **SH** – Stakeholder, **SOP** – Standard Operating Procedure, **TOM** – Think, Observe & Manage, **DISCOMS** – Distributing Companies who buy power from generating companies and distribute, **VUCA** – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous

## Introduction

While digitisation and reorientation of the processes have been the focus of various articles and papers published in the field of Project Management emphasising the “Hard Core” principles and guidelines in the Project Management framework there are very few articles and papers emphasising the ‘soft side’ i.e., human angle of the Project Management. This paper brings out the behavioural aspects and emphasises the “Soft issues”, the human angle especially in construction projects – in this case, setting up power plants at a global level.

Often, we tend to ignore the important role played by the project team members who work on the set guidelines and processes in the Project Management framework to deliver the end results. No doubt these processes, and guidelines help us in working in a structured manner and enhance the efficiency of the project team members, at the same time, we need to appreciate the fact that it is the “people” who perform and deliver the results. Unlike other resources which depreciate over a period, only People appreciate over a period in terms of experience and knowledge gained and enhanced wisdom.

It is essential to have the processes in place but at times, we find that the goal post itself has shifted and the rules and regulations have changed drastically. Our “conventional” and “time tested” approach that has worked for us over the years is no more valid in today’s fast-paced changing world. As such, we are left gasping for fresh air. It is here that we need to reorient ourselves, think, and act out-of-box to survive the unprecedented challenges imposed by the onslaught of a Volatile Uncertain Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment. More importantly, the stresses and build-up of anxiety levels we witness today are far too high, forcing us to adapt newer techniques to survive and stay ahead in this ruthless world.

Being innovative, taking faster decisions, and acting swiftly to break the shackles are the order of the day.

## Key Result Areas

Various feedback sessions with our Project teams have culminated in collating the key factors which have been further analysed for their impact on the overall project to arrive at the vital few that have helped PMs in staying positive amidst chaos and act proactively.

The experiences shared by the Project Managers and other Stakeholders (SHs) have been collated and summarised herein below with the aim that the Project Management fraternity benefits from the cross-learnings thereby enhancing their efficiency and effectiveness as a Project Team.

### **Dynamic World and Changing Scenarios**

We all live in a VUCA world wherein various factors are at interplay and, the growing complexities often derail our plans. While it is easier to blame the external events that are beyond our control but staying put does not take us anywhere. Delaying and/or deferring the decisions to a later date are known to have further complicated the issues leading to project failure.

*“Stagnant water loses its purity and in cold weather becomes frozen; even so does inaction sap the vigour of the mind.” – Anonymous*

Tough times call for tough decisions and when we look back, we realise that tough times have made us stronger and better persons. To survive the onslaught of various forces at interplay, we need to be proactive to pick up Early Warning Signals (EWS), reorient, and realign ourselves to mitigate the risks.

*“Change is only a constant thing in the world” - Anonymous*

### ***Innovating and adapting newer ways of working –***

The lockdowns, the complexities, the uncertainties, and the ambiguities have forced us to think, observe and manage things differently. Today, there is a pressing need to be innovative and adopt newer ways of working to survive, succeed and sustain the leadership in our chosen field. A quote below aptly describes the need for innovation particularly in dealing with the newer challenges the VUCA environment presents to us.

*“Innovation is the unrelenting drive to break the status quo and develop anew where few have dared to go”. - Steven Jeffes, Marketing & business expert*

After deliberations and discussions at various forums, we decided to accept the challenges, and adopt changes in our work culture. Over a period, we realised that adapting these changes has enabled the successful completion of the projects at a global level and these newer ways of working have been key enablers in our project management journey. Major ones are discussed below, and we are sure that these would help the Project fraternity at large.

### ***Unprecedented Challenges & Newer Solutions -***

Usually, in situations beyond the reasonable control of the parties to the agreement (contract), the clauses such as Force Majeure, Suspension of works, etc. genuinely help the parties and offer protection in form of extensions to compensate for the days lost due to stoppage and/or disruption of the works. Herein, was a twist, some of the owners had obligations with DISCOMS wherein they had the commitment to export power from these

ongoing power projects and therefore it was of utmost importance to keep up with the commitments. Also, in some cases, the LDs leviable was too high which the owners could ill afford and wanted us (the contractor's project management group) to help them out.

No one would have dreamt about the World virtually coming to standstill with no flights operating at a global level clubbed with the stringent travel restrictions imposed by various countries. The remote location of the project sites and the non-availability of adequate medical healthcare facilities further aggravated the situation and posed different challenges. Moreover, the Owners' commitments to having power out entailed maintaining the pace of installation works. Also, the pre-commissioning and commissioning activities and the Safety checks had to be completed before the start-up and commencement of commercial operation of the Power Plant, this demanded revisiting the project schedule, alignment of interdisciplinary SHs and collectively agreeing for fast-tracking and crashing the scheduled activities.

Needless to state that such unprecedented complexities and challenges amounted to putting the spanner in the works; no one would have thought that one day we would encounter such problems and the guidelines/plans for handling such events were not existing. It was therefore left to the Project teams to devise a workaround plan as well as a backup plan to tide over the unprecedented situation. We eventually decided to devise a plan using the technology and set up a network of remote workstations wherein the Construction and Commissioning were conducted by the local operators at the site with the help and guidance from the experts operating from the remote stations through video conferencing.

### **A way forward**

Newer challenges hitherto unheard of demanded adopting newer ways of working. Taking a cue from an age-old quote "Necessity is the mother of invention", we evolved a new project management methodology with emphasis on Workarounds whilst focussing on the wellness of our critical resource – PEOPLE. Of course, since this involved deviating from our hereto tried and tested Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), to begin with, there was a lot of resistance to adopting such changes. Convincing SHs and the acceptability of workaround plans itself was a major challenge. We evolved a plan underlying Who, What, When, and How. Clarity of roles and the value addition by individuals resulted in larger acceptance. Initially, we discussed the plans with our SHs internally followed by detailed discussions with other SHs including the Owners, Owner's consultants, our Construction and Commissioning teams, etc. to concretise these steps and firm up action plans. The discussions emphasised the purpose, defining how the activities would be performed, associated risks and mitigation plans, and backup plans, in case we had some hits and misses.

As some of us would have witnessed, executing global projects with multicultural team members presents us with a different flavour. To perform as a cohesive unit with team members having divergent backgrounds, their viewpoints varied which required working with higher EI, higher empathy, and Self & Social awareness. Here too, initially, some of the SHs had different opinions and reservations about the success of these plans, but

the strong conviction and working with a clear intended purpose behind adopting such changes paved the way in engaging and realigning the team members. The team members with renewed vigour were charged up to make things happen. The synergy and buzzword “Let’s do it” echoed in sync. In hindsight, we are proud that we took such decisions and paved the way for the successful execution of the projects.

*“Times are undergoing violent changes; it is time we change. Else, we run the risk of being left high and dry on the abandoned beaches of yesterday.” – Anonymous*

To stay afloat, most of the PMs realised that what had worked for them earlier was not helpful in the current situation and there was an imperative need to accept and acknowledge that the challenges were of different magnitude forcing them to quickly realign themselves, invent newer ways of working to ensure completion of the projects and attain the project objectives. Some of the key actions initiated are outlined below -

- 1. Remote operations** – It will not be an exaggeration to state that the Pandemic Covid19 enforced a thrust on Working from Home (WFH), which is a new normal today. Most of the organisations have started working on a hybrid model and extended WFH facilities for the employees. In this regard, we too evolved and adopted new working methodologies like setting up remote working stations to minimise the impact and continue the installation and erection activities under remote supervision hitherto, unheard of in the construction industry. The guidance from the Installation and Construction experts helped the site team to overcome challenges and maintain the pace of work at the site. Also, the pre-commissioning and commissioning activities at the site were also carried out under the guidance of the experts operating remotely to commission the Power Plant and we achieved Power out from the Plants.
- 2. Wellness** –The remoteness of site location and inadequacy of quality medical and healthcare services at some sites imposed different challenges. We needed to maintain high fitness levels, stay fit and build up immune system/body resistance so as to lower the risk of virus infecting the individuals. The spikes in the casualties world over further aggravated the situation; the fear and associated stress levels also spiked with every passing day. We initiated steps with thrust on the wellness of the team members at the site and extended the same for our contractor’s employees. We involved and engaged our site team to set up gyms and other recreational facilities which helped us in enhancing the overall fitness levels and reducing the stress levels of all stakeholders at sites.
- 3. Monthly reviews** – Apart from having periodic structured Project Review meetings, we also started “monthly wellness meetings” wherein the team members were encouraged to share their general feelings about themselves and “how we as individuals can some help to others to achieve wellbeing on a personal level on all fronts – mental, physiological, psychological, social, emotional”. The

thrust was on the Project personnel addressing the wellness issues - how the individuals were feeling and what can be done to reduce the stress levels for each of the individuals and largely raise the energy level of the team. It was a conscious decision not to discuss any work-related issues/project status etc. in such meetings. We observed that “We care for each other” was demonstrated by the team members which further helped in bonding and building the team spirit resulting in higher collaborative efforts.

4. **Stress Management** – With the negative news pouring from every nook and corner and the cloud of toxicity building up with negative vibes, most of the individuals confined themselves to four walls thereby creating their own cocoon/shell which further dampened their spirits and restricted their interactions. To capitalise on the harnessing of the power of divergent thinking, and diverse ideas/opinions of the individuals, we evolved a “buddy concept” wherein the team member would choose a buddy and confide things that have been bothering him/her on the personal front. All this with an understanding that things shared would remain confidential and that the role of a buddy was mainly to help the aggrieved person in exploring the possible ways of handling situations. The pair would jointly identify the root cause of the problem and explore alternative solutions. The aggrieved/affected person was free to select the best fit. It gave us an immense sense of satisfaction to note that the buddy concept was not only an instant hit amongst the team members, but some individuals have continued to work as a pair even today.

It is worth stressing here that usually, the site team members are busy with their site works and occupied 24x7 - practically from breakfast to bed. The packed schedule hardly provides them the luxury of having quality time for themselves i.e., “*me time*” is often missing. We observed that a shift in their lifestyles and taking baby steps like pursuing their passion – walking in the morning/evening, listening to music, exercising, cycling, etc. helped them in reducing their anxiety levels.

5. **Psychological safety** - We observed that often the team members were having some mental block, they were holding back and were reluctant to seek help mainly due to the fear of being tagged as weak/incompetent person. We realised that the thoughts were bottled up which further prevented some individuals from sharing and even listening to other’s viewpoints. The discussions revealed that we needed to work on this aspect on a top priority before the fire spread and engulfed others. Hence, we worked on a strategy with an emphasis on creating an environment with “Psychological Safety\*\*” wherein the team members were encouraged to speak to each other, and have open, free, and frank interactions without any inhibitions.

And, for this to happen, we realised that the creation of a high level of trust was of utmost importance wherein each team member confided things without risking/compromising confidentiality. This acted as a key enabler prompting the team members to shed their inhibitions and participate in the discussions freely, resulting in higher openness and transparency as a team. Over a period, we observed that the interactions within the team had improved which further helped in team bonding and enhancing the team spirit.

*\*\* Psychological Safety as defined by Organizational behavioural scientist Amy Edmondson “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.”*

- 6. Communication** - Various discussions and deliberations revealed that the communication gaps mainly lead to misunderstandings and the development of micro-cracks. The misunderstandings, if left unattended, brewed over a period, and led to the loss of trust, faith, and confidence in each other. Over time, these micro-cracks further propagated into wider cracks affecting team morale and results.

We realised that we need to deflate the pressures and especially when the face-to-face meetings were restricted, it was of utmost importance that everyone was on the same page and to that extent, the flow of information was maintained. “Stagnant waters emanate a foul smell”. To facilitate, the free flow of information, we increased the frequency of online meetings mainly helping the SHs to open up and vent their feelings with an overall goal of helping them to identify the factors which were bothering them both on the work front and on the personal front. Not only the issues were presented by SHs but the SHs were also encouraged to bring out their version of what best could be done in the present situation and how each one of us would contribute and add value in tiring circumstances. The focus of the discussions shifted from being “*Problem-oriented*” to “*Solution-oriented*”, this again acted as a booster dose for many.

- 7. Active Listening** – We all have problems of varying nature and varying magnitude. While some who are good at problem-solving would hold the problem by scurf of the neck and crack the problems, some allow their problems to surmount and crack under the pressures. At a deeper level, we found that the situations demanded someone to listen to their stories and their version of stories before commenting on their behaviour. Some of the team members even echoed the statement - “*For the problems, you feel, you have with me, please discuss with me before you discuss with others*”. The same goes for the problems faced by the SHs on a project, it is always better to discuss the problems with those involved (team members) before raising the issue with an outsider. The mantra here is “*Attack the problem, not the messenger*” and “*listen without being judgemental and jumping to conclusions*”. As individuals, we all look forward to someone who is receptive and understands us at a deeper level. All we need is that people “empathise” and not “sympathise” with us. It is all about the feelings and the

emotions and establishing emotional connections with the individuals that help in bonding and understanding each other better.

8. **Stakeholder Management** – Consciously working on the above factors helped us in working as a close-knit team thereby enhancing the energy levels, the Stakeholders (SHs) had a sense of belongingness and as a part of the bigger team to collectively strive for achieving bigger things. With the increase in casualties reported across the globe, we even heard grapevine stories wherein the team members at the site shared that in case, if something happens to them and/or their family members back home, they were sure that some of their colleagues will rescue them and/or their family members, and timely medical support would be provided. PMs made sure that the SHs were involved and engaged which in turn resulted in developing higher trust levels and team spirit. This resulted in a spurt in the Excitement, Energy, and Enthusiasm levels of the individuals enabling them to achieve what was perceived as a “miracle”.

### Key benefits – Top 10 behavioural aspects

*“It’s fine to celebrate success, but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure.”*  
 Bill Gates

As discussed above, the team members adapted newer techniques and focussed on the soft side of Project Management (behavioural aspects) mainly helping and supporting each other resulting in the successful completion of the projects. Thrust on the major changes and their impact on the overall projects are summarised in the table-1 below:

**Table 1: Changes/Newer Adaptations and their impact on Project Outcome**

Sr No.	Changes/Newer Adaptations	Impact on Project Outcome
1	Changed mindset – Remote working	Acceptance of the fact that remote working is a new norm and adapting to the new remote work culture
2	Shift to online meetings – video conferencing	Acceptance of the fact that video conferencing works and reduced dependency on in-person meetings
3	Shift to online meetings – video conferencing	Reduced travel costs and contribution to reduction in CO <sub>2</sub> emissions
4	Open & Frank Communication	High Trust level and Team Spirit. Facing challenges and achieving the objectives
5	Sense of belongingness	Promoting a ‘One Team’ mindset. Focussed goal Working of the Team as a cohesive unit. <b>“Together Everyone Achieves Miracles”</b>
6	Higher frequency of online meetings	Improved Involvement and Engagement of SHs
7	Reorientation & realignment of thinking of individual members	Enhanced focus and ownership.



		Risks may occur but we have a mitigation plan
8	Usage of meeting calendars	Optimal utilisation of resources. Do away with non-essential meetings - Time wasters
9	Self-organised/Self-discipline	Develop a Strategic Leadership mindset for leading the teams.
10	Leadership is beyond the title. Respect that everyone is a leader	Shared responsibility & ownership. Emergence of new leaders

## Conclusion

When we look at the past, we can safely state that although the Pandemic COVID19 clubbed with tough times like geopolitical situations, the upward spiralling of commodity prices and supply chain issues have impacted us badly. Yet there is a silver lining in a way that it has taught us that innovativeness and adapting newer ways of working are keys for succeeding in a dynamic world and emerging as winners.

We need to follow processes to work in a streamlined manner and deliver results. However, when faced with challenges, we need to Pause, Think & Observe and Manage our thoughts and actions very much akin to slowing down, applying breaks, and changing gears, before accelerating on our way forward.

We firmly believe that the points discussed above would benefit the Project Management fraternity at large.

The quote below aptly describes tough times, their impact and the need to heed to the lessons learned.

*“Rough seas make stronger sailors. Tough times build greater people. We are stronger together, and with all hands-on deck, we will navigate this choppy sea. After all, storms don't last forever” - Anonymous.*

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