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The Project Manager's Role in a Theatre Restoration Project



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1. THE PROJECT MANAGER'S ROLE IN A THEATRE RESTORATION PROJECT

In the theatre business, the ultimate project is the renovation/restoration of a historic theatre – not only because theatre and restoration are complex specialties, but also because of the number and range of smaller projects it includes. The overall restoration project is really a massive network of projects from surveys to planning reports, from demolition to drywall, from the marketing campaign to the opening night event.

I like to think of a project as any assignment which cannot be completed with one telephone call, but whether it is a research proposal, a feasibility study or theatre restoration, every kind of project has four things in common: a client; a project manager; a beginning, middle and end; and a product.

Regardless of the actual title used, a project manager is the individual responsible for the planning of the project, the creation of the product and the interaction with the client. The project manager is the client's representative – a point of contact for all employees and/or consultants on the project and a central clearing house of information.

Projects are typically characterized by their temporal nature, high visibility, low levels of commitment, affinity for criticism and irresistible challenges.

1.1. The Client and The Project Manager

The process begins with the client and the project manager. Although it may seem obvious, the first step is to define who the client is and how the project in question is to be managed.

Very often in the theatre restoration planning process the client group itself is complicated. In the case of nonprofit or government ownership of a property, the client is the community represented by a board of trustees or an elected body. In a private operation the client may be a company president or a board of directors representing investors. In the least complicated formula, the client is a sole proprietorship who assumes the task of project management. Even in this rare scenario, there are many stakeholders who should be considered part of the client group, not the least of whom are the public (future paying audiences) and the licensees (future users of the building).

The project manager may be the owner of the theatre to be restored; it may be an employee assigned this responsibility; it may be staff hired specifically to perform this function; or it may be an independent consultant. All four possibilities may, in fact, be part of a project management team depending upon the scale and scope of the project and the needs of the project at different phases. Every project is unique and should have an appropriate management system tailored to its specific situation and existing resources.

2. PHASES OF A THEATRE RESTORATION PROJECT

The beginning of the project involves research and assessment of options, (also known as “doing your homework”). At this time, the client and planning and project management staff or consultants determine whether there should be a restoration project. The initial concept of the “product” or facility to be developed is identified. The phase may culminate in a comprehensive feasibility study which examines the needs, market and physical, financial and operational feasibility of the proposed project.

If the feasibility is established, the project may move to the middle phase which entails more planning and coordination of marketing, fund raising and design development. The project architect is contracted as the chief designer and professional coordinator of all the technical consulting teams who develop plans and specifications and tender documents. If the bids are acceptable, construction can begin. If they are not, replanning is in order. During this phase, certain elements may be “pre-bid” such as demolition, theatre seat removal and restoration.

The end of the project includes construction, restoration, the opening night, remedying deficiencies and monitoring work and systems through warranty periods. The restoration project is seldom complete on opening night and, of course, marketing, fund raising, and restoration maintenance will continue either as programs and projects through the life of the building.

3. PROJECT MANAGEMENT SCOPE OF THE WORK

A conventional definition describes project management as the systematic coordination and control of all aspects of the project to produce a facility and operation which meets the client's requirements of function, schedule and budget. The scope of work may include:

Research, planning, data & collection management
Marketing, development & financing program coordination
Contract administration & coordination
Design development & implementation
Facility management & management plans

Although project management personnel and terms of reference may evolve, it is critical to the progress of the project that at any given time it is absolutely clear who is accountable. Also, the client's "project manager" should not be confused with the architect's and the construction managers. Depending on existing hierarchies and policies, it may be more efficient to use an alternative title such as "project director" or "owner's representative".

3.1. Who Should be the Project Manager?

The ideal project manager is an individual from the local community who has training, skill and experience in theatre, restoration, planning and management. Such a specialist is not available in every community but the theatre's general manager may be an excellent candidate if they have strong planning and management skills, a general background in theatre, an aptitude for design, and time to study other examples of theatre restoration. In this case, an independent theatre specialist may be helpful at the beginning to provide an action plan or project management guide tailored to the needs of the designated project manager.

Some prospective theatre projects do not have the benefit of existing staff. Or, even if the theatre is operating prior to restoration, it may be that the contemplated scope of the project is greater than the general manager can handle without assistance. There may also be a perception that an objective professional should be involved in the initial planning process. In these cases, the ideal project manager is an independent theatre project management specialist who can help define the client's requirements and deliver a well-designed project on time and on budget.

3.2. Sources of Professional Assistance

An appropriate management consultant may be found through a variety of firms specializing in theatre management. Some architectural and theatre consulting firms which specialize in historic restoration have excellent planning and management resources within their firms (many are members of the League of Historic American Theatres).

Occasionally, a technical consultant to the project is assigned the role of a project manager. This might work if the technical consultant is equally as interested or skilled in marketing, fund raising, politics and operational issues as their own discipline. It is worth considering, however, that in most cases the primary skill of the technical consultant is not overall project management. They might see the presence of a crane on site as a budget item or a scheduling concern and overlook that it might also be a media photo opportunity and an occasion to invite sponsors or donors to the site.

3.3. Qualities of the Project Manager

The project manager is a tactical coordinator who is qualified to interpret diverse and often conflicting requirements to ensure the most efficient and timely expenditure of resources. They know how to make everyone's job easier.

They should be multilingual – understanding the languages of the boardroom, the theatre, the media and master builders. More often than not, the project manager is the key interpreter between a board of volunteers and a team of professionals, most of whom are not fully versed in the business we call “show”.

The best project manager is the focal point of activity who provided objective and insistent voice of a professional director to the process – a source of options, inspiration and strategic planning who, from experience, recognizes opportunities in time to act upon them and anticipates pitfall in time to avoid them.

The project manager should have outstanding organizational skills and understand the value of cost-benefit analyses.

The project manager should have sufficient technical expertise to know that “all that glitters is not gold.”

Above all, the project manager should apprehend theatre as much as cool reason could ever comprehend.

3.4. Selection of a Project Manager

Whether selecting a consultant or an individual to fulfill this role, it is a good idea to invite proposals from at least five prequalified candidates. Interview several candidates (three to five), and be sure to check their credentials, references and philosophies to ascertain if they are compatible with your expectations.

Consider starting with a smaller contract for a research report, a business plan, an option paper or a project management plan depending upon your immediate needs. This should help you determine whether the consultant or individual in question can fulfill the continuing needs of your project.

The key to theatre planning is defining what the client wants and how best to get it, however, if I may take the liberty of quoting a popular American statesman, Dwight D. Eisenhower:

No matter how much wisdom may go into planning, whether it be an insurance program, an armed invasion of a continent, or a campaign to reduce the inroads of disease, the measure of its success will always be in the spirit and mettle of the individuals engaged in its execution.

No matter how much treasure may support a project, or how elaborate its organization, or how detailed and farsighted its operational scheme, the human element is always the central one.