

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE FACTORS IN PROJECT FAILURES: A FOCUS ON COST AND BUDGET MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: Project failures, especially in cost and budget management, challenge various sectors by straining financial resources, causing delays, and undermining stakeholder confidence. These issues disrupt schedules and damage organisational reputations, highlighting the need to address underlying causes for improved project success and sustainability. This paper is aimed at investigating the primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in managing project cost and budget performance. A qualitative approach in a form of exploratory design was used, and interviews were conducted with Middle and Senior Managers (n = 15) in their respective offices. Manual thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The study found that lack of leadership, lack of stakeholder involvement, poor budget control, poor budget planning, poor communication, stakeholder dissatisfaction and stakeholder's engagement are the primary reason for project failure at Transnet. This paper suggests that Transnet Engineering should establish leadership development programs for project managers, standardised budget control and planning procedures to prevent financial overruns and adopt robust communication and stakeholder engagement framework to improve information flow and stakeholder involvement throughout the project lifecycle. This research is necessary to bridge the knowledge gap and provide policy and practical actionable recommendation to address leadership and governance challenges at Transnet.

Keywords: Project Failure, Leadership, Governance, Quality Control, Transnet Engineering, Project Management

Introduction and background

The incompetency of leadership and poor governance are the causal factors for project failure in the region. Empirical evidence has linked lack of commitment, poor supervision, poor planning, political interferences, delays in payment, bureaucratic obstacles to project failure at Transnet in South Africa (Damoah and Kumi 2018). The literature suggests that Transnet faces challenges in delivering projects within the allocated budget despite various policy prescriptions and provisions (Pillay 2006; Emwanu 2014; Benitez et al., 2010). Issues such as inefficient pricing due to poor funding and financing methods, project overruns ranging from 5 to 58%, and the need for complete transparency and communication in funding mechanisms have been highlighted in the research (Scorza and Giuzio 2017). Furthermore, the involvement of external consultancies like Hatch McDougal and Guba indicates a perception of poor performance by Transnet's capital project division, impacting profitability and project success rates (Ismail et al., 2014).

These challenges highlighted the significance of addressing funding inefficiencies, project management practices, and stakeholder communication to enhance Transnet's project delivery capabilities and ensure adherence to allocated budgets. While previous studies mainly focused on the challenges faced by Transnet during projects delivering within the allocated budget despite various policy prescriptions and provisions, little research has been conducted to investigating the primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in relation to managing project cost and budget performance. Poor leadership and governance have been identified as the key factors that impedes the successful delivery of projects within the allocated cost and budget at Transnet. Therefore, this research is necessary to bridge that knowledge gap and provide policy and practical actionable recommendation to address leadership and governance challenges at Transnet.

Literature review

Challenges in leadership and governance affecting project success

The absence of effective leadership and poor governance significantly hinders the successful delivery of projects, leading to various challenges and failures. In Africa, leadership failures have been attributed to frequent changes in leadership, lack of political will, weak institutions, and corruption, ultimately impeding good governance and regional development (Musawir, 2023; Enaifoghe et al., 2020; Akwei et al., 2020). These issues are a premise for an unstable environment for projects, where inconsistent leadership leads to fragmented vision and strategy, and corrupt practices divert resources away from intended project outcomes.

Similarly, in Nigeria, Multifarious Infrastructure Projects (MIPs) have faced governance issues such as erratic funding sources, unwarranted scope changes, and political interference, resulting in project failures and delays (Ramakrishna et al., 2023). Inconsistent funding disrupts project timelines and planning, while political interference often leads to projects being prioritised for political gain rather than public benefit. Drawing from Hoque et al., (2023) it can be argued that these governance problems not only delay projects but also inflate costs and compromise the quality of the final deliverables. Therefore, without competent project leadership and good governance, project teams fail to understand the technical requirements and risks, leading to poor decision-making and delivery. Umuteme and Adegbite (2022) averred that, executive leadership behaviors, such as a lack of support or unrealistic expectations, undermine project teams' efforts and morale, leading to project failures. These issues require a focus on developing sustainable leadership and governance models tailored to the specific challenges faced by different types of projects and parent organization (Tuazon et al., 2021; ul Musawir et al., 2020; Zaman et al., 2020). This includes fostering stable and visionary leadership, ensuring political and financial support for projects, and building institutional capacity to manage and oversee project implementation effectively.

Primary causes for project failures

Project failures often originate from a combination of leadership and governance issues, particularly in managing cost and budget performance. Research has identified critical factors contributing to these failures, including poor financial capacity, inaccurate costing, corruption, incompetence, poor planning, and a lack of commitment by project leaders

(Hamada and Akzambekkyzy, 2022; Eja and Ramegowda, 2020; Damoah and Kumi, 2018). Furthermore, the relationship between project governance and project success has been examined, showing that effective project governance significantly enhances the likelihood of project success, although this relationship can be negatively impacted by exploitative leadership behaviors (Zaman et al., 2022). A study by Damoah (2015) further argued that, by addressing deficiencies in traditional project management methods and focusing on comprehensive governance strategies encompassing project scope, planning, cost estimation, risk management, and integration management, organizations can mitigate the risks associated with project failures and improve overall performance. The table below (see table 1) presents a summary of primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in managing cost and budget performance.

Table 1: Primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in managing cost and budget performance.

Source	The primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in managing cost and budget performance.
Damoah and Kumi 2018	Leadership failures: lack of commitment, poor supervision, poor planning. Governance issues: political interferences, delays in payment, bureaucratic obstacles.
Kunert and von der Weth 2018	Failure factors: unclear objectives, insufficient communication, lack of top management support, and poor scheduling. Planning crucial: collecting good ideas, context, and genesis considered.
Schoenhardt, Pardais and Marino 2014	Contractual risk misallocation Non-integrated project team Lack of internal capacity
Cleveland 2022	Critical impact factors: risk management practices, performance tracking tools. Leadership competencies: resource management, strategic awareness for organizational strategy.
Flyvbjerg 2013	Root cause of project failures is optimism in risk assessment. Project planners underestimate risks leading to cost overruns and delays.
Zuofa and Ochieng 2014	Corruption and lack of professionalism major causes of project failure. Governance mechanisms needed to enforce standard guidelines for project success.

Source: Author's compilation

Drawing from the table above, it can be argued that project governance structures are essential for ensuring project success. Effective governance leads to better cost and budget management, risk mitigation, and improved stakeholder communication. Good governance frameworks provide clear roles, responsibilities, and processes, facilitating transparency and accountability. This, in turn, helps to prevent cost overruns, ensures timely identification and management of risks, and fosters better engagement and communication with stakeholders, all of which contribute to the overall success of projects (Kerzner 2022).

Methodology and design

Given the philosophy of this study, which is interpretivism, qualitative approach was adopted as the premise to investigate the primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in managing cost and budget performance at Transnet in South Africa. An exploratory research design was then employed, and in-depth interviews were

conducted with middle and senior managers at Transnet to gather their experiences and the meanings associated about the phenomenon understudy (Bougie and Sekaran 2019; Saunders et al., 2009).

Sample size and sampling method

Through a non-probability sampling method in a form of purposive sampling technique, a sample size of 20 participants was used to selected from a population of approximately 14 500 staff members. Drawing from Vasileiou et al., (2018) the adequacy of sample size for a qualitative study range between 20 - 30 participants. A sample size within the aforementioned parameters/range is deemed appropriate to guarantee data saturation in a qualitative study (Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018). A study by Moser and Korstjens (2018) provided a compelling argument that a sample size of 20 – 30 participants is sufficient provided that the selected participants are knowledgeable and experienced about the phenomenon under investigation. The table below provides a summary of the profile of study participants (see table 1 below).

Table 1: The profile of study participants.

	Res p.	Gender Group			Position						Length Service		of				Age Group				
			M	F	Other	EX	GM	SM	MM	0 to 5	6 to 10	11 to 15	16 to 20	21+	Up to 29	30 to 39	40 to 49	50 to 59	61+		
African	10	6	4	0	0	0	4	6	4	5	1	0	0	4	5	1	0	0			
Asian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Coloured	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Indian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			
White	5	4	1	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	1	1	3	0	1	2	1	1			
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			
TOTAL	15	10	5	0	0	0	5	10	4	5	2	1	3	4	6	3	1	1			
Legend Gender Group: M = Male =10 F= Female =5											Position held: EX = Executive manager =0 GM = General Manager =0 SM = Senior Manager =5 MM = Middle Management =10										

Source: Author's calculations

Data collection

To ensure validity and reliability of the data collection instrument pilot study was conducted with 3 senior managers and 2 middle managers prior the full-scale data collection. The response from the experts (participants) led to the adjustment and refinement of the questionnaire before the full-scale data collection. According to Malmqvist et al., (2019) data validity and reliability in a qualitative study could be achieved through pilot study with experts from the relevant field. The researchers proceeded to a full-scale data collection; 20 open-ended questionnaires were electronically (email) sent out to 20 managers. The data collection instrument has briefing statement where all

participants were made aware that their participation is voluntary. The participants were instructed to return the completed questionnaire within 2 days - 1 week. The responses provided by each participant resulted in a follow-up question which provided a deeper understanding of the primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in managing cost and budget performance.

Data analysis

In this study, manual thematic analysis was employed as a useful analytical technique to provide unmatched depth, originality, and adaptability in data analysis (Shanmugam et al., 2023; Sheikhattar et al., 2022). According to Shanmugam et al., (2023) researchers often use manual thematic analysis to gain a deep contextual understanding of real-world issues, beliefs, and experiences. While qualitative data analysis done using software provide efficiency and scalability, it is not a substitute for the reflective insights and nuanced understanding gained from manual thematic analysis. Cross-validation and group discussion are vital for ensuring mutual comprehension, analytical accuracy, and research validity (Mills et al., 2007; Strahler et al., 2006). To prevent confirmation bias, the authors independently coded the transcribed data, verified by a qualitative researcher for accuracy and consistency. An external party provided objective analysis, prompting revisions as advised. Initial themes were discussed until agreement was reached, and findings were reviewed jointly by authors and a neutral investigator to avoid bias.

Findings and discussion

As alluded to in the preceding section, the data collected through interviews, was coded then categorised into three main themes and six subthemes emerged from the thematic analysis. The main themes were: 1. Stakeholder's engagement 2. Team issues 3. Cost and budgeting and Subthemes were: 1.1 Lack of stakeholder involvement 1.2 Stakeholder dissatisfaction 2.1 Poor communication, 2.2. Lack of leadership 3.1 Poor budget planning 3.2 Poor budget control.

Stakeholder's engagement

At Transnet Engineering (TE), a branch of Transnet SOC Ltd in South Africa, stakeholder engagement performance is critical to project success and peak performance. Stakeholder engagement in South African Rail Engineering Projects emphasises how crucial effective stakeholder engagement is to improving teamwork and integrated project delivery. Based on the work by Kunert and von der Weth (2018) it can be argued that stakeholder engagement is essential for achieving organizational objectives, mitigating risks, and creating opportunities, with relationships between project actors influencing project performance outcomes significantly.

Lack of stakeholder involvement

All participants acknowledged that there is a lack of stakeholder involvement, which significantly hampers project success. They emphasised that external stakeholders are often not sufficiently engaged during the planning and delivery phases of projects. Participants stated the following as a setback in setting clear expectations and providing regular feedback: "You know, as much as we see a need to involve certain external stakeholders, it is difficult for us as managers to involve them fully, because it is not

permissible as per the policies to involve them adequately, so certain details about the project that may affect the external stakeholders are discussed without the involvement of external stakeholders” Drawing from this response, it can be argued that this lack of involvement has the potential of leading to misalignment between project objectives and stakeholder expectations, resulting in decreased support and cooperation. A study by Trogrlić et al., (2021) opined that without meaningful stakeholder input, critical insights and local knowledge are often overlooked, causing project plans to miss essential contextual factors. Consequently, projects face increased resistance, delays, and higher costs due to unforeseen challenges and lack of stakeholder buy-in.

Stakeholder dissatisfaction

The response by the participants underscores the importance of proactive stakeholder management and careful handling of project requirements to avoid potential pitfalls such as misalignment of expectations, frustration among stakeholders, scope creep, delays, and increased costs. Project communication and a structured approach to managing stakeholder interactions and project scope are crucial for project success and stakeholder satisfaction. The following response by the participants point out some of the participants’ opinions concerning stakeholder management: “If I don't manage stakeholder expectations well, there's a real risk that what they expect from our project won't match what we deliver. This disconnect led to frustration and disappointment among stakeholders on many occasions.” (Middle managers) “When we fail to manage stakeholder requirements effectively, we might see scope creep. This means additional features or changes get introduced without adjusting the project timeline, budget, or resources accordingly. It's a surefire way to cause delays and increase costs.” (Middle managers) Stakeholder dissatisfaction during the delivery of construction projects at Transnet SA is influenced by various factors identified in the research by (Mokwena 2020). The study by Mokwena further indicated that factors affecting quality management practices, such as lack of compliance monitoring and assessment of subcontractors' technical competence led to stakeholder dissatisfaction.

Team issues

Team issues during the delivery of projects at Transnet SA are influenced by several factors identified in research. According to Mokwena (2020) Quality Management Practices at Transnet Capital Projects (TCP) reveal challenges such as insufficient project compliance monitoring and inadequate assessment of subcontractors' technical competence, which impact project quality. Shemelis (2017) further added that leadership styles and behaviors of key project participants, such as clients and contractors, significantly influence Health and Safety (H&S) performance, emphasizing the need for visible leadership and a strong commitment to H&S culture for successful project outcomes at Transnet SA.

Poor communication

Middle Manager and Senior Manager at Transnet highlight significant issues with communication within their project management teams. The managers propose varying solutions, from establishing clear protocols to enhancing regular communication practices and using project management tools. The following are some of the participants’ opinions concerning project communication: “As project managers at Transnet, we often experience significant challenges related to poor communication. The effectiveness of communication

varies greatly, frequently leading to misunderstandings among team members and stakeholders. We struggle with a lack of consistent communication channels, which adversely impacts the coherence and coordination of our projects. This inconsistency often results in crucial information being overlooked or misinterpreted, hindering our ability to stay aligned with project goals.” (Middle Manager)

“There is a general consensus among us that communication needs significant improvement. To ensure project success, it is imperative that we establish clear, reliable, and effective communication protocols throughout the project lifecycle. Despite the common challenges project managers faced with poor communication within their teams, notable differences were identified in their approaches to address these issues.” (Senior Manager)

“We experienced various challenges in communication and thus offered differing strategies for improvement. Some advocated for the implementation of clear communication protocols to ensure consistency and clarity, while others emphasized the importance of regular status meetings and the use of project management tools to enhance information flow and coordination.” (Middle Manager)

A study by Kunert and von der Weth (2018) pointed out, unclear objectives, insufficient communication, lack of top management support, and poor scheduling as key sources of project failure. Therefore, to improve Transnet's project delivery capabilities and ensure adherence to allocated budgets stakeholder communication should be given attention to detail.

Lack of leadership

Based on the response of some middle managers, it can be argued that leadership often fails to address team fatigue, leading to decreased performance and delays in project completion. Based on the opinions expressed by Participant 2, leadership does not provide clear direction and support, resulting in unresolved conflicts within teams. The study participants reported that: “We frequently experience challenges due to leadership's failure to address team fatigue, which leads to poor performance and project delays. The lack of clear direction and support from management often results in unresolved conflicts within our teams. Also, leaders tend to delegate tasks without conducting proper impact analysis, causing resource strain.” (Middle Manager)

“While some of us emphasize the need for leaders to take a more active role during crisis situations, others believe that providing better support during critical project phases is essential. These issues highlight the urgent need for improved leadership practices to enhance project outcomes and team dynamics.” (Middle Manager)

These issues emphasise the pressing need to improve leadership practices to enhance project outcomes and promote better team dynamics. Addressing these issues necessitates the development of sustainable leadership and governance models tailored to the unique challenges of various projects and their parent organizations (Tuazon et al., 2021; ul Musawir et al., 2020; Zaman et al., 2020). This involves nurturing stable and visionary leadership and building institutional capacity to manage and oversee project implementation effectively.

Cost and budgeting

The cost of Transnet's multi-fuel pipeline project surged from ZAR12.6 billion to ZAR24 billion in five years, raising concerns about management and government subsidies (Maroun and Garnett 2014). Challenges in South African construction procurement, including delayed payments and poor funding, cause inefficiencies. Poor cost management leads to contractual disputes, underscoring the need for effective practices. Issues like rework and poor planning impact project performance, as seen in South Africa and Saudi Arabia, highlighting the importance of addressing these factors to improve outcomes (Adebowale et al., 2020).

Poor budget planning

The assertion by the study participants underscored that projects often undergo changes in scope without corresponding adjustments to the budget. This results in financial overruns as the initial budget does not account for the expanded scope. A clear picture was provided by 2 the study participants on the responses below: “We often experience poor budget planning, which manifests in several challenges. Inconsistent communication between project teams and management frequently leads to misunderstandings and misaligned expectations. The roles and responsibilities during the planning phase are often unclear, causing confusion and inefficiencies. (Middle Manager)

We face frequent changes in project scope without corresponding budget adjustments, which results in financial overruns. While some of us highlight the need for clearer roles and responsibilities to ensure accountability, others stress the importance of regular financial audits and robust contingency planning to address unforeseen expenses and maintain budget control. These challenges significantly impact our ability to execute projects effectively”. (Middle Manager)

Cost overruns and delays not only affect the project's bottom line but also impact stakeholders such as investors, clients, and the community. According to Flyvbjerg (2013) there is a notable need to enhance risk management practices and realistic planning in project development. The author further ascertains that through acknowledging and adequately preparing for potential risks, project planners can mitigate the likelihood of cost overruns and delays, thereby enhancing overall project success and stakeholder satisfaction.

Poor budget control

Drawing from the responses of 2 participants, it evident that project managers at Transnet often face difficulties due to inadequate financial forecasting and insufficient risk assessment. These deficiencies result in budget planning that does not account for all potential costs, leading to significant gaps that can hinder project progress. Additionally, these participants believe that using historical data to inform budget estimates is crucial, while others focus on the need for involving all relevant stakeholders and conducting thorough risk assessments. The assertion by the study participants also highlighted the necessity for Transnet to refine its project planning strategies to address these challenges and improve project outcomes. When the study participants were asked by the researcher about the main obstacles faced by project managers at Transnet during the planning phase of projects, they responded by saying: “As project managers at Transnet, we often face significant challenges in the planning process due to the lack of detailed financial

forecasting and risk assessment. Budget planning frequently fails to account for all potential costs, leading to critical gaps that hinder project progress. Moreover, there is often insufficient involvement of stakeholders in the initial stages of budget planning, which exacerbates these issues.” (Middle Manager)

“While some of us believe that utilizing historical data to inform budget estimates is essential, others emphasize the importance of involving all relevant stakeholders and conducting thorough risk assessments to ensure comprehensive and accurate budgeting. These challenges highlight the need for improved practices and processes in project planning at Transnet”. (Middle Manager)

Based on the Responses, there is a critical need for better financial planning and risk assessment practices at Transnet, along with greater stakeholder engagement, to overcome the existing challenges in project management (Kumalo, 2021).

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper sheds light on the primary reasons for project failures, focusing on leadership and governance in managing cost and budget performance at Transnet in South Africa. Through a qualitative approach using case studies and semi-structured interviews with Middle and Senior Managers, it became evident that lack of leadership, lack of stakeholder involvement, poor budget control, poor budget planning, poor communication, stakeholder dissatisfaction, and poor stakeholder engagement are the primary reasons for project failure at Transnet. Moreover, this paper revealed that poor leadership and governance directly correlate with the poor and protracted processes of budget management, thereby adversely affecting the overall project outcomes. The implications of this paper extend beyond academia, offering practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to confront and mitigate the lack of competent leadership and poor governance in managing cost and budget performance at Transnet in South Africa.

Policy implications

The findings of this study have significant policy implications for enhancing project management at Transnet Engineering. Policymakers should consider instituting comprehensive leadership development programs to ensure that project managers possess the necessary skills and competencies to lead effectively. Implementing standardized procedures for budget control and planning can mitigate the risk of financial overruns and ensure more accurate forecasting. Additionally, implementing robust communication frameworks and stakeholder engagement protocols will facilitate better information flow and involvement throughout the project lifecycle.

Practical contributions

This study provides actionable insights for practitioners to address common pitfalls such as poor communication and inadequate stakeholder involvement. By adopting the recommended strategies, Transnet Engineering can improve project success rates, foster a culture of transparency and accountability, and ultimately achieve better alignment between project objectives and outcomes. These measures will not only enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of project execution but also build trust and satisfaction among stakeholders, contributing to the overall growth and sustainability of the organization.

Limitation of the study

Although qualitative research is crucial for gaining deep insights and understanding complex phenomena, researchers must be aware of its limitations. The specific contexts and experiences documented in this qualitative study may not be broadly applicable, limiting the ability to generalize the findings. Additionally, different researchers might interpret the same data in varied ways, potentially leading to differing conclusions.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflict of interest or funding to disclose.

Data availability statement

Data will be made available on a reasonable request from the authors.

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