

A logistician's plea

by John Rickard

As a logistician, have you ever first learned of a new project when the purchase requisitions appeared on your desk? Or received a vehicle request 20 minutes before it was urgently required?

If so, take comfort from knowing that you are not the first. Unfortunately you are unlikely to be the last. At best, scenarios like this reduce support functions to a constant state of 'fire-fighting' - inefficient, frustrating and stressful for all concerned. At worst, project implementation can be delayed and people suffer needlessly.

To some degree, in almost every agency and nearly every situation, this scenario is not uncommon. There is indeed a myriad of internal and external factors affecting our ability to plan and coordinate: poor or unreliable local infrastructure, rapidly changing market conditions, poor communications and security, fluid population movements, over-worked staff, short donor lead-times for proposals, donor regulations, institutional memory, inter-agency relations, staff turnover, staff capacity and so on. These factors do make it difficult for managers to plan and coordinate. The problem is that in response, rather than review those elements that we can control, managers tend to de-prioritise the whole planning and coordinating process.

Not so long ago, smaller projects were often implemented by managers wearing several hats - such as 'project manager', 'administration and logistics', 'Country Representative' and 'finance'. Given the scale of the operations, this was generally manageable and, given the limited number and the proximity of staff, planning was almost automatically coordinated. However, recent projects involving dozens of expatriate and local staff have involved expenditures of millions of dollars. Yet despite the multiplication in complexity of our responsibilities, we seem to have neither set priorities nor made plans to make essential changes and modernise the management, administrative and collaborative structures that would allow

us, as organisations, to plan and coordinate our expansion.

At field and organisational levels we see programmes structured into Projects, Administration, Logistics and Financial Support (or minor variations thereof). This evolution is necessary to manage large programmes effectively but I would argue that our basic mentality of being led by project implementers has not changed. Information flows can be - and are - initiated, maintained and stopped by projects - the latter normally from oversight, overwork or inexperience. We may think of ourselves as integrated when in fact our projects and their support services are 'stove-pipe' in structure and mentality. The support functions are often considered as appendages rather than integral elements of the whole.

How many times have managers stayed up alone into the small hours to submit a proposal before the morning deadline? More often than we would probably care to admit. Are proposals routinely reviewed by Finance and Logistics staff? No. The results can range from insufficient funding solicited for warehouse infrastructure to unrealistic lead times on necessary equipment or supplies (and therefore delayed project implementation).

Coordinated planning is also impeded by a general lack of understanding of what good logistics does and can offer: improved efficiency, contingency plans, accountability and reduced cost. This creates a catch-22 situation. Logistics are not included because managers are not sure what additional value they add... logistics requirements are not fully met, resulting in fire-fighting.... managers see logistics struggling (rather than seeing the underlying problems) and conclude that, for subsequent proposals, a logistics review is not advantageous....

This is not an exercise in assigning blame, rather one of highlighting the realities of operating under already difficult circumstances, within structures that do not insist on or fully value the integration of all players in the operation.

As a community, however, we are not unique and therefore do not necessarily have to learn all new tricks the hard way. Many of the concerns and constraints facing humanitarian logistics mirror the substance of discussions in the private sector 15 years ago. There, technological advancements in parts of the manufacturing and retail sectors had made their core activities almost as efficient as they could be - the only area remaining that could yield improved service and/or reduced costs was that of how these companies interacted with their suppliers and how they got their products to market. This is supply chain management - what many of us call logistics.

Underpinning it all should be a solid flow of information within an integrated team

Concluding plea

Planning and coordination need to be seen as essential rather than merely desirable. We need investment in systems - and investment in the integration of our systems and structures. We need to hold consultation in high esteem, both internally and externally, and we need to seek advice from experts. Given the will, the investment, today's technology and the private sector's best practices, there are significant improvements in efficiency to be made by the donor and aid community. Underpinning it all should be a solid flow of information within an integrated team, throughout project planning and implementation. It seems simple and rather obvious, yet it struggles to gain acceptance.

*John Rickard is Director of Logistics, International Rescue Committee, New York.
Email: jrickard@their.org*