

How to run a non-profit organization with directive PMO and PMI standards

- *The playground project*

This is the story of how I accidentally was voted into the board of a community association. How I grew as a professional project manager, and realized the footprint and value project management can have in a community and in a non-profit organization.

Community associations in Sweden

A community association is formed to manage land, facilities and more that is collectively owned by several community members. Examples of community association management objects are private roads, parking lots, green spaces, playgrounds, docks, and swimming pools. The property owners within the community are automatically members of the community association.

A community association is a legal entity that can acquire rights, assume obligations, negotiate contracts and enter into other legal transactions. This is according to Swedish law (1973:1150) on the management of community associations. What the community association administers is shown by its statutes and formal facility decision.

Ekerö-Vasby Community Association

Ekerö-Väsby Community Association was formed in 1969 and comprises 180 properties and houses. The townhouses were built 1969 after architects Jurgen Frenssen and Sonja Eliasson. The houses are clustered around pedestrian alleys. Parking spot in garage buildings are available to every house. There is a laundry, a heating central, and a large number of playgrounds with various type of play materials. The townhouses are surrounded by an unusually large park area with lawns, trees, flower beds, bushes, fruit trees and more. Park areas of this size are not made today, and even in the 70s it was unusual.

The Ekerö-Väsby community association's main task according to its statutes and facility decision is to heat all the properties and make sure that there is both cold and hot water in the taps. The association have shared water and sewer lines, and electrical lines for e.g. lighting of roads and parking areas. Furthermore, management of household garbage, maintenance of our roads, garages, parking lots, parks and playgrounds are included in the association's tasks. The association shall also provide TV and laundry facilities. Each property has one vote at the AGM (Annual General Meeting). Motions are the members' way to propose ideas for the board to implement. The Board is responsible that decisions made at the meeting are implemented. The board consists of five regular members and two alternates; Chairman, cashier, secretary, two ordinary members and two substitutes.

How it started

Back in 2010 I and my wife were expecting our first child. We had decided to move from the vibrant neighborhoods of Stockholm city, and was searching a house in the suburb Ekerö where my wife grew up. After a couple of month we found a nice townhouse in a friendly area, with a mixture of older and younger families, and close to the soon-to-be grandparents.

As we moved to the neighborhood, we became neighbors with the Svenssons. Stig Svensson was the self-appointed supervisor of the street, a former chairman of the community association. You know, the guy who knows everyone, makes sure that the trees on the streets have enough water, and sits outside just to say hi to everyone. The fact that he had passed the age of 75 and was half-blind didn't matter. We got along well and had some good jokes in the alley. After a nomination by Stig, I was that same year accepted into the board of the association in 2010. After a year on the board I was nominated and appointed the chairman. None of this was something I had planned for at all, so I use to say I'm the accidental chairman.

As I took over as chairman, I was of course influenced by my background as committed PMP and as a manager in a commercial B2B business, where customer involvement and service was everything. At that point I didn't know much about maintaining gardens or planning sewer lines. What I had was my project management and PMO experience. And knowledge that success comes from collaborating with excellent partners, and through a collaborative approach deliver the most to your customers. It was natural for me to build the board as a PMO. Acting as the owner of the Portfolio Management process, including monitoring and reporting on active projects and portfolios (following up project until completion), and reporting progress to top management (the board) for strategic decisions on what projects to continue or cancel.



Townhouses in the alleys of Ekerö-Väsby.

Running a PMO in a non-profit organization

The degree of control and influence that PMOs have on projects depend on the type of PMO structure within the organization. Typically they can be supportive, controlling or directive. Our community association's PMO is directive, by taking control of and also managing the projects. The board is responsible for organizational excellence, which seeks to enhance the practices of execution management, organizational governance, and strategic change leadership. In practice, and in addition to the strategic change leadership, the board members are the project managers. We initiate, plan, execute, monitor, control and close the projects.

The core of the strategic decisions is the maintenance plan and the facility decision. The maintenance plan describes the needed investments and maintenance over time, outlining the strategic program that provides direction to the project portfolio of the association. Based on the maintenance plan we can make

sure to strategically prioritize. The maintenance plan is prioritized based on KPIs. Below is an introduction to how the playground project was formed based on these KPIs.

1. Relevance due to risk of failed performance:

When we moved to the area, a lot of the playgrounds was not up to date. Swings were missing and other equipment had a general lack of maintenance. After letting a playground manufacturer inspect all playgrounds, we found several fails that could lead to serious injuries and even death.

2. Relevance due to member satisfaction:

The community was, and is still, going through a generation exchange. A lot of families moved in when the houses were built in 1969. The first generation of children is now adult, and has moved out from home. Keeping playgrounds up to date was therefore not important. Now however, families with young children were moving in every month, making safe and modern playgrounds very important.

3. Relevance due to added monetary value of the property:

Money is important. Making sure your investment is performing in the right direction is essential, especially if you are a young family with a lot of expenses on clothes, day care, strollers etc. Modern and safe playgrounds are a vital factor in keeping the attraction of the community in this phase of generation exchange. Modern equipment will also lower cost of maintenance.

Professional project management in a non-profit organization - the playground project

Besides from the uprising non-for profit PMO, I could directly notice the value of implementing professional project management phases and knowledge areas in the community association. We initiate, plan, execute, monitor, control and close the projects. We apply the knowledge areas Integration, Scope, Time, Cost, Quality, Human resources, Communications, Risk, Procurement, Stakeholder. Below is an example of the playground project.

Laws and European Standards

Until 1 January 1999 there were Swedish standards for playground equipment. These national standards were replaced by new European standards for playground equipment outdoors. The new standards are divided into seven parts and include general safety requirements and test methods, specific requirements for swings, slides, ropeways, roundabouts and seesaws. Furthermore, there are standards for assembly, inspection, maintenance and operation. There is also an additional standard for cushioning surface. The standards contain the minimum requirements for safety. A standard is always voluntary. In Sweden, rules for the outdoor environment are available in the Swedish Planning and Building Act (PBL). There are requirements regarding open spaces for play and outdoor access, and requirements for maintenance of playgrounds and permanent devices so that the risk of accidents is limited. Supervisory authority over playgrounds is the municipal building boards with the support of PBL. A community resident suspect a playground is neglected; he or she can report it to the municipality who can close it down if it's in bad condition. Since 1996 Sweden has the Product Safety Act (SFS 1988:1604) for goods supplied in public activities e.g. playground equipment. Responsible supervisory authority over the Product Safety Act is the national consumer agency. Responsibility that a playground conforms to safety is in the end the property owner, in this case the community association.

Accidents in playgrounds

The safety of children is of high importance. In cooperation with the National Consumer Agency, a student at the Mälardalen University in Sweden has written a report concerning accidents on playgrounds and schoolyards. Because of playgrounds throughout the country are built in much the same way, the outcome should not differ too greatly if you look at different locations. The report shows that it is relatively common with accidents on playgrounds, largely due to the children there spend a lot of time playing, test their limits and practice their mobility. Most accidents occur in the summer months (except from July, when day care have summer closed) and more common among boys than among girls. Falls are the most common accidents, with bone fractures and contusions (bruises and abrasions). Injuries are usually in the upper part of the body. The rate of head injury increases the younger the children are.

The project - from initiation to closing

Because of the recognized defects in the maintenance of playgrounds, a playground manufacturer on behalf of Ekerö-Väsby community association conducted a visual inspection of all playgrounds in the area that the association is responsible for. Several serious flaws were noted that can lead to personal injury, or in the worst case death. The equipment and the ground were in substandard condition and did not meet today's standards. Based on these facts, a Project Charter was developed containing aspects such as the case description and expert judgment. The board agreed to initiate planning of the project based on this collected information. A Project Management Plan was developed. Based on the visual inspection, the scope was defined to include all playgrounds in the community, and a target audience of families with children up to 15 years. In regards to project time management, activities and duration was estimated as below.

Year 1:

Submission of a web based survey.

Member presentation of results from the survey.

First draft of playground renovation plan with approximate costs, in collaboration with reference group and potential contractors.

Feedback on the renovation plan from residents and reference group.

Final renovation plan for upgraded playgrounds, with quotation from appointed contractor.

Presentation at the Annual General Meeting.

Year 2:

Playground renovation step 1. Corrective actions based on lessons learned from step 1.

Year 3:

Playground renovation step 2. Corrective actions based on lessons learned from step 2.

Year 4:

Playground renovation step 3. Corrective actions based on lessons learned from step 3.

The quality planning regarding renovated playgrounds included hiring a professional playground inspection company. A inspection company was hired year 3 and are now doing professional inspections of the playground equipment, with inspection reports as a result. Directly after the AGM year 1, the board realized risks of injuries needed to be mitigated quickly, before the renovation of new playground equipment, by rebuilding some of the current equipment. The gardening entrepreneur of the community association was hired for this job. They demounted swings with strangle knots and rebuilt a playhouse with several serious remarks. The gardening entrepreneur was also hired to annually do maintenance of the playgrounds according to the notes in the inspection reports.

The board realized that the maintenance plan would set the cost limits of the project. Without new playground equipment in the maintenance plan there would be no space in the association's budget to execute the project. Thanks to the work done during year 1, the board was able to make both scope and cost very clear to the community members in time for the AGM. The maintenance plan was accepted much thanks to this. Besides from cost planning, this approach also mitigated the actual risk of not getting the project financed at all.

External communication was done by information on the association's web page and by leaflets that where handed out in the mailboxes. Also, the project set up an e-mail list to the reference group. We have also successfully within the board (project group) used Google Drive for creating and sharing all project documentation.

As a part of stakeholder management, it was decided to include the families living in the community, as a collaborative form of requirements collection. To facilitate this, the board assigned a reference group of volunteers based on interest in a digitally distributed survey. The project conducted tours in the area together with the reference group, reviewing the current equipment and discussing new possibilities.

Out of 180 residents, a total of 53 responses were reported to the board. The conclusions were in short; Age spread in the area is relatively flat, many older emphasized that there are visiting grandchildren who use the playgrounds. Almost half of the households use the playgrounds rarely (if ever), the most common is one or two times weekly. Only two of the playgrounds were given an average rating of medium (3), the rest were between 1.2 and 2.6, which may be interpreted as a relatively poor rating. Most residents wanted more and new; swings, bird's nest swings, play equipment, basketball hoops and toy vehicles (car / boat / bus / train), rocker, baby swings, play equipment for the smallest and sandboxes. A majority wanted to have fewer but larger playgrounds (e.g. focusing on one or two large playgrounds in the area) while many thought the current distribution was good. Other forms of activity locations or equipment that was desired; benches, barbecue grill, table and fitness equipment.

The project team talked with several suppliers of playground equipment. However, thanks to the survey and the recognition of the project within the community, one resident who was also a sales rep for a major playground equipment manufacturer, approached the board. The sales rep had children of his own and could get some discounts, so there was a clear win-win situation. The project got great support in the design and calculation of various proposals of new playground equipment. The project was able to implement Building Information Modeling (BIM), which is a process involving the generation and management of digital representations of physical and functional characteristics of places. This was done through 3D digital models that where made based on drawings that the project and the sales rep agreed upon.

The result

We have now reached year 4 in our plan. Our residents are now enjoying safe and modern playgrounds, and the last one is implemented this year. Some corrective actions has been made through the project, but the project was in large executed according to the initial plan. The board is getting lots of thumbs up from the families in the community, and we notice more and more people in the playgrounds. Even people outside the community are coming over to play at our playgrounds!



One of the renovated playgrounds.

Looking back, I'm amazed that the project management skills I use professionally can add value in my community. This is an insight that I would like to spread among the project management community. In addition, I attained new knowledge working in this type of construction project. This has actually helped me in my new job, managing hardware installation and construction projects! Getting involved in non-profit organizations can in other ways be the best career boost and professional development opportunity to undertake. Most important of all, I was through my profession, able to give back to my community, making new and valuable connections within the neighborhood along the way.

So what happened to Stig, the supervisor of the road that got me on the board to begin with? Unfortunately he passed away after some time of illness. His widow is still living in the house. We have pleasant chats out on the lawn, and sometime we give her a ride to the supermarket. I'm very humble to the influence your community members and neighbors can have on your life.

About

About the author: Richard Svahn, M.Sc., PMP, PMI-ACP is a professional project manager with a passion for the big picture and connecting the dots. Richard has extensive experience within professional project management, strategic product management, and process reengineering. Richard has worked in entrepreneur driven & commercial environments, within government & defense, and with cooperative societies & associations.