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Key Strategies for PMUs
in Government Departments

By Personnel Management Team

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Navigating the PMU Maze

Key Strategies for PMUs in Government Departments

By **Personnel Management Team**

This blog explores the role of Programme Management Units (PMUs) in government departments and discusses the challenge of PMUs becoming too embedded in bureaucratic processes, which can dilute their impact. The blog outlines key strategies to maintain focus and effectiveness, such as balancing immediate demands with long-term goals, preserving team identity, strategic communication, and prioritising high-impact work.

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In today's rapidly evolving social sector, many organisations collaborate closely with government departments, often operating as a team within Programme Management Units (PMUs). Embedded within government systems, these teams help drive and implement policy reforms and development projects. PMUs differ from traditional government units because they focus on specific projects with clear goals rather than general bureaucratic tasks. PMUs are more flexible and can adapt quickly to changes. This model offers a unique opportunity to influence and shape public policy directly from within the system, leading to significant, meaningful change.

However, as the PMU becomes more embedded within the government's educational department, they can start resembling the very processes they intended to strengthen. This can undermine the PMU's mission and effectiveness, diluting its impact and potentially stalling progress.

THE CHALLENGE: BEING ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL

At my previous workplace, while working with the Education Department of a municipal body as a PMU, our team set out to develop a data system to track students' foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes. The goal was to strengthen early learning in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) and enable data-driven decision-making.

However, our focus gradually shifted as we became embedded in the system. Instead of institutionalising an automated data system, we responded to ad-hoc requests—creating dashboards from existing Excel data sources, preparing reports, and assembling presentations to support officials. Over time, we ended up drafting daily notes and compiling annual handbooks, which provided short-term utility but diverted us from our original mission of building a sustainable, data-driven platform.

Despite developing a Power BI dashboard as a short-term fix, we couldn't even institutionalise it—let alone build the envisioned system. The PMU, intended initially to drive systemic change, ultimately became a reporting support unit. As a result, innovative thinking took a backseat, and our work began mirroring the very system we aimed to improve. The initial momentum was lost, and the team became just another cog in the bureaucratic machinery, undermining its mission and effectiveness.

Managing a PMU involves several complexities. Balancing immediate demands with long-term goals is one of them. Maintaining a distinct identity within a larger bureaucracy is another. Strategic communication is also crucial. Addressing these challenges with the right strategies can make a significant difference.

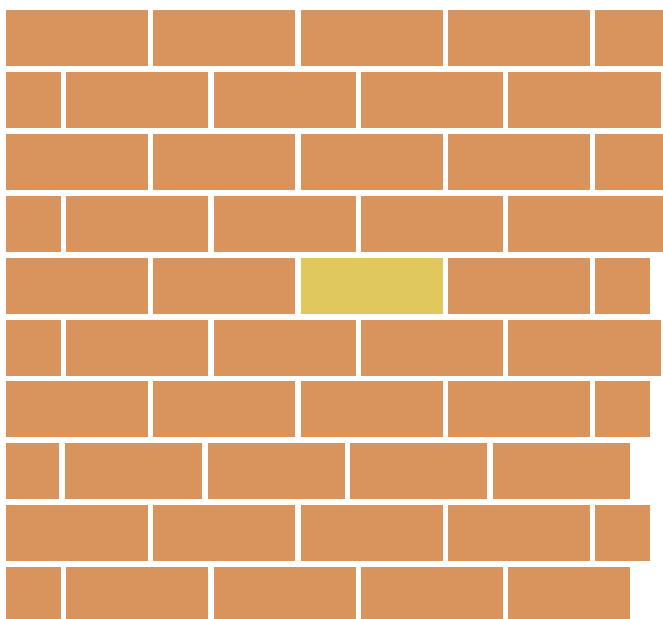
KEY STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING FOCUS AND EFFECTIVENESS

While there are no easy answers to prevent this, my experience has shown that several strategies can be beneficial:



Keep Calm and Long Game On

Addressing immediate stakeholder demands is necessary to prove credibility when starting out. These tasks might not always align with the bigger vision, but it's important to work on them initially. The key is to keep long-term goals in sight while navigating day-to-day tasks. Regular reminders about the bigger picture and stepbacks help keep the team motivated and focused. Digital tools/trackers help track progress.



Not Just Another Brick in the Wall

Teams can easily be perceived as additional resources or ad-hoc government employees. Small tasks, like supporting daily administrative duties, can contribute to this perception. To remain effective, it's crucial to maintain a healthy distance and preserve the team's identity. Knowing when to blend in for collaboration and when to step back to uphold a unique role is essential.



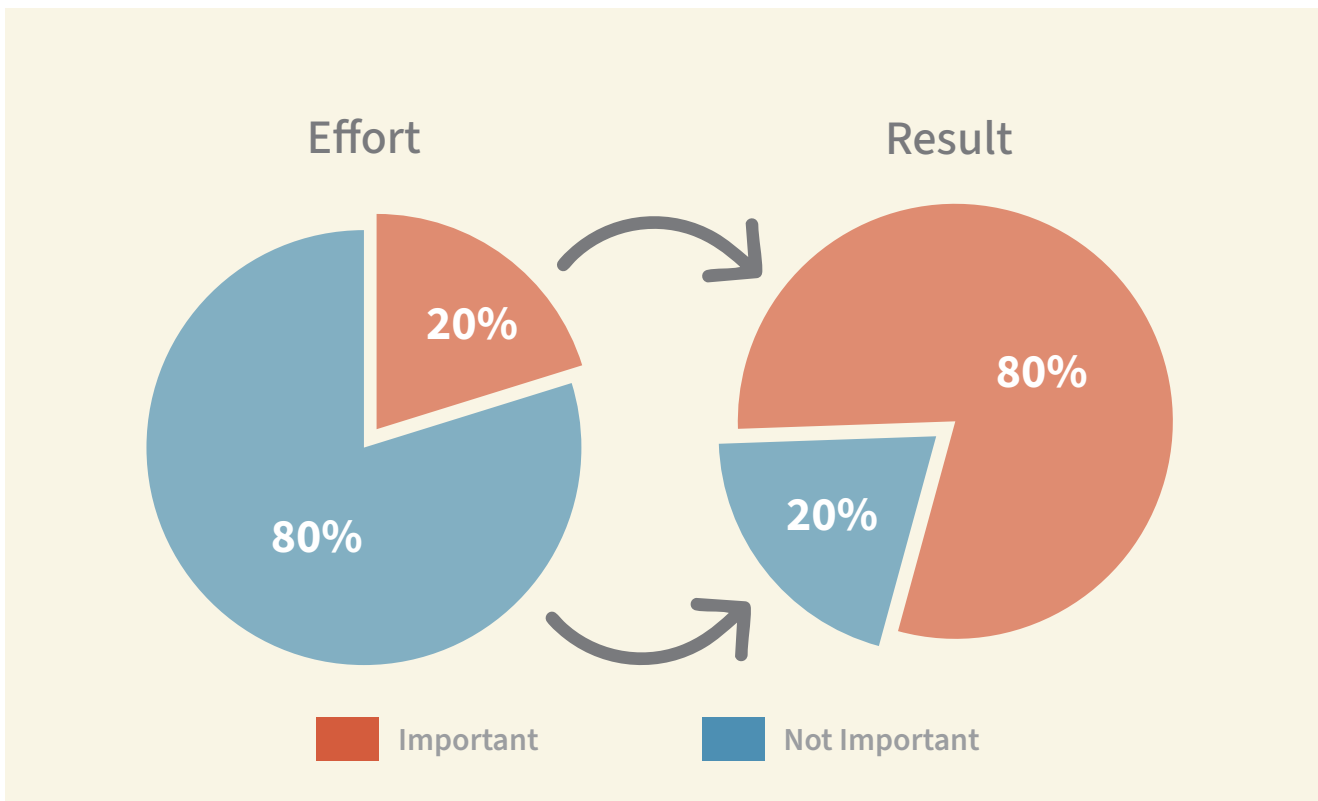
Mastering the Art of Saying No

In a government setting, it can be tempting to say yes to every request to maintain goodwill. However, it is crucial to discern when to agree and when to resist. Saying yes to everything can dilute the impact and overwhelm the team. It’s okay to say no to tasks that don’t align with priorities. Politely but firmly explaining the reasons and offering alternative solutions can maintain credibility and allow the team to focus on what truly matters.



Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Clear and consistent communication is key when working within a government setup. Establishing Steering and Working Committees ensures timely decision-making, coordination, and task implementation. Regular updates on progress, challenges, and successes are essential. Using various communication channels—emails, meetings, formal reports—helps keep the team and stakeholders informed and engaged. Effective communication also manages expectations and reduces misunderstandings.



Focus on What Matters: The Pareto Principle in Action

Government projects often involve a whirlwind of tasks and parallel work streams, making prioritisation crucial. It is vital to focus the team on activities that make the biggest difference. This often means setting expectations with government stakeholders, who might view every task as equally urgent. Helping them see that prioritising high-impact work is essential for real progress helps motivate the team and prevent burnout.

CONCLUSION

Navigating these challenges requires a thoughtful approach. By balancing immediate tasks with long-term goals, prioritising what truly matters, and maintaining a unique identity, organisations can drive real change without getting bogged down by the systems they aim to strengthen.

How can your PMU team stay true to its mission while operating within a complex system?

To enhance your PMU's impact, consider evaluating your strategies, prioritising high-impact work, and maintaining clear communication with stakeholders.



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