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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

While working with a central government agency to support capacity building, our team set out to institutionalize a competency-based capacity-building process for officials. The goal was to strengthen service delivery by aligning training with well-defined competencies, ensuring that officials had the right skills to perform effectively.

However, in the initial 3–5 months, as we became embedded within the system, our focus gradually shifted. Instead of designing and institutionalizing a structured competency-based framework, we found ourselves responding to ad-hoc requests—organizing events and webinars, creating pitch decks, and preparing reports to support ongoing initiatives. Over time, we were pulled into drafting notes, compiling annual handbooks, and assembling presentations for senior officials. While these tasks had short-term utility, they diverted us from our original mission of building a competency based capacity-building ecosystem.

Despite developing a structured training roadmap as a short-term solution, we couldn't institutionalize it—let alone implement the envisioned competency-based system. The PMU, originally set up to drive systemic reform, ultimately became a support unit for routine tasks. As a result, innovative thinking took a backseat, and our work began mirroring the very system we aimed to transform. 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.

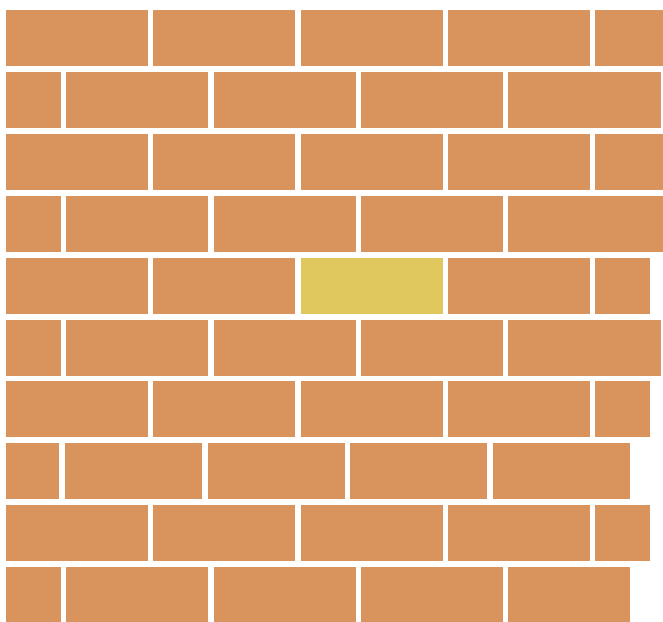
KEY STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING FOCUS AND EFFECTIVENESS

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.



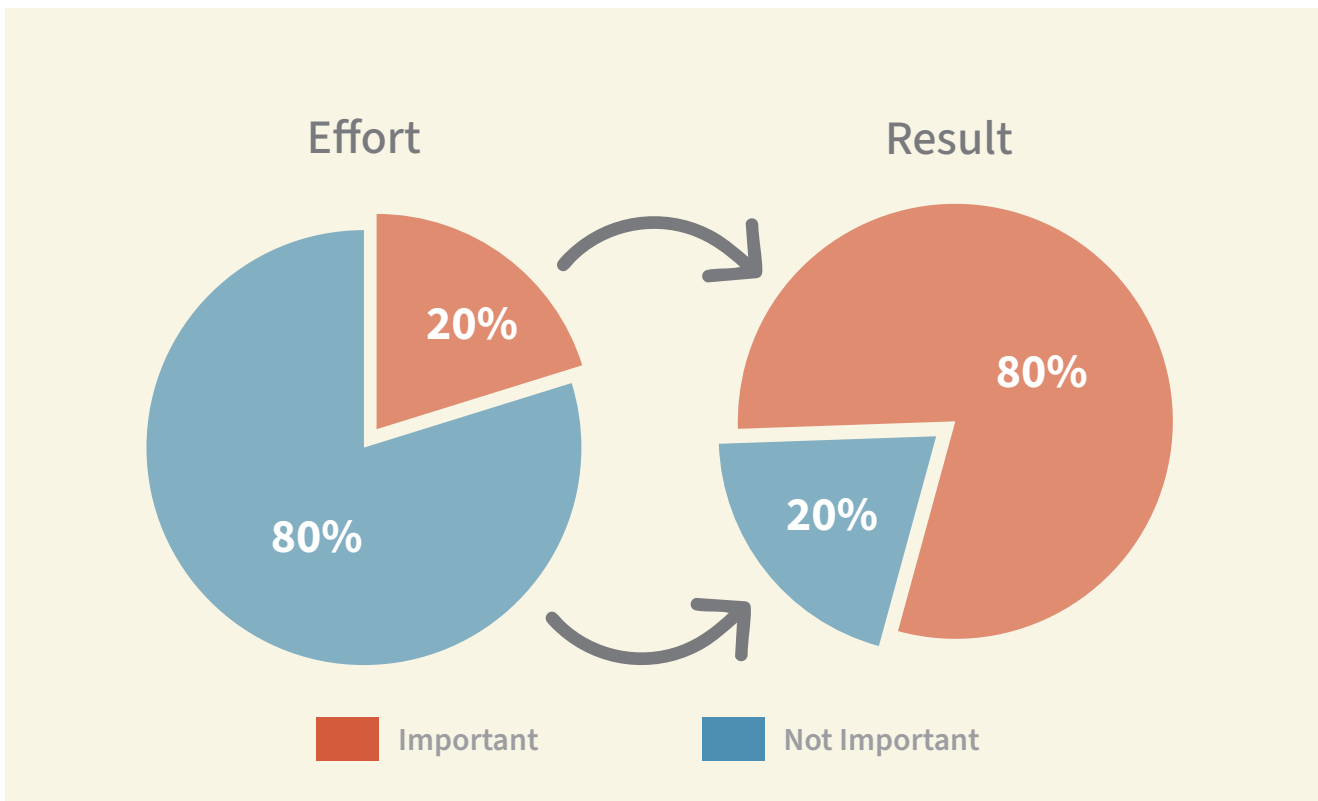
Mastering the Art of Saying No

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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