

Communication in Project Management

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Abstract

As in any other discipline of business the importance of communication cannot be overemphasized in managing projects. Statistics show that seventy four percent of projects are unsuccessful. One of the many factors that contribute to the failure of these projects is poor or insufficient communication. By taking a closer look at the three main phases of projects - initiation, execution and closedown we can try to determine the role and impact of communication during each phase.

### Communication in Project Management

The importance of communication in the success of a project is immense. Careful communication planning and setting the right expectations with all the project stakeholders is extremely important. Face to face initial communication within the project team to establish the team dynamics and learning the customer's expectations are the keys to success when starting a project. Throughout my years as a project manager, my belief that the success of a project is a matter of effective communication has been continuously reinforced.

As listed by Kerzner:

Typical literary definitions of effective communications include:

- An exchange of information
- An act or instance of transmitting information
- A verbal or written message
- A technique for expressing ideas effectively
- A process by which meanings are exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols

Effective communication involves both sending and receiving the message. With this in mind, a good definition of project communication management can be "Project Communications Management includes the process

required to ensure timely and appropriate generation, collection, dissemination, storage, and ultimate disposition of project information" (Project management institute standards committee, 1996, p103).

Basically, communication is the way information is exchanged between entities. There are various components of the communication process. They include the message, source, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver, feedback, noise, context and shared meaning. One of the primary points of effective communication is that it is interactive.

Communication during projects can be of many different types such as oral, written and non-verbal. Oral communication is mainly utilized in face-to-face meetings or over the telephone as well as in group meetings and affords a lot more flexibility to the speaker, such as the ability to communicate not only with voice but body language, attitude and nuance. The subtle nuances that can be communicated during verbal communication are not present during written communication. Written communication, on the other hand, is usually more precise. It can be sent through correspondence such as memos, letters or notices. It can also be sent via Email or the project management information system. The key to making written communication more effective is to first grab people's attention, then give them a reason to want to read the

rest of the communication. I have found this a very useful technique in my projects. When communicating with the customer, say about the status of the project, I try to include attention grabbing graphs and pertinent milestones along with the usual text status and the variance reports. Another type of communication that plays a big role during projects is the non-verbal kind. The way people dress, the tone of their voice, their stance while talking all convey something significant. For example, an interesting anecdote states that during important negotiations with vendors or other business parties, the project team at NASA was taught to keep their hands under the table at all times so as not to produce any misunderstandings through their non-verbal gestures. Being aware of a person's body language can greatly enhance your own level of understanding. A sudden intake of breath may indicate that a person wants to speak, or a furrowed brow could be an indicator that either the other person does not understand you or does not agree with your point.

During a project, communication can occur in various directions depending on who is communicating. There is upward communication to management from your own organization and the customer's organization. Lateral communication takes place with customers and within project teams.

Keeping in mind the complexity of communication it is easy to understand how difficulties in communication may arise. As noted above, effective communication is extremely critical to the success of the project. Many factors can cause barriers to effective communication. A main reason for communication gaps is simply that people have different preferences for effective communication. Some people are oriented toward details, while others want only the big picture. It's easy to overburden a manager with the detailed reasons for decisions you've made, when all they may really care about at the moment is the overall status of the project. This type of miscommunication is very likely to happen when two people with different communication styles work together on a project. I have observed miscommunication due to this reason several times. For example, once one of the technical leads on my project was discussing the need for a new laptop computer with the authorizing manager. He was quite detailed and technical in his request. After reviewing his request the manager turned to me and simply asked, "Well, how much will this cost?" The manager's only point of interest, beyond establishing that the need was genuine, was the financial impact. It is extremely important to be cognizant of the level of detail and preferred communication style of the receiver during an exchange. Otherwise you face the danger of, at best

boring them, and at worst turning them against your point of view. Some other common reasons for communication problems during projects can be information overload, hidden agendas, power games, bias towards certain people, etc.

A project manager should exercise overall team building for the project team members and other stakeholders, in order to facilitate better communication. A project manager can provide communication skills training to the team members, as well as set some important ground rules during the initiation phase of the project and at significant times such as the start of a meeting. When attempting to form a new cohesive team with a group of individuals, some kind of "ice-breaking" activity can be helpful. Ongoing successful communication requires some basic rules that all team members can keep in mind such as not jumping to conclusions, resisting the urge to interrupt and listening to others. Other important factors that can be commonly practiced for successful communication are to seek to know more and to make listening a conscious activity. Different types of communication are appropriate to meet the different communication needs that arise during a project.

The cultural considerations in project communications are becoming increasingly important due to the globalization of the work environment. There are

some points to keep in mind in order to facilitate better cross-cultural communication, first, be careful of your usage of certain terms and phrases. What may be common terms to the American culture may not be as easily understood by other cultures. Such as using the term "over the top" may not convey the intended meaning to someone not from America. Secondly, consider cultural nuances. In some cultures when a person is nodding their head while you are giving instructions, it might simply be because in that culture it is considered rude to interrupt, whereas in other cultures it might signify complete understanding. Thirdly, it's very important to have personal face-to-face interaction. Another important point is to be aware of the holidays etc. so that you can appropriately structure your project schedule.

Effective communication is important during every phase of the project life cycle. During the initiation/planning phase careful attention needs to be given to detailed project communication planning. As stated in the Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK) from the Project Management Institute, communication planning involves "Determining the information and communications needs of the stakeholders: who needs what information, when will they need it, and how will it be given to them."

There are several factors to keep in mind during communication planning. The communication requirements of the project need to be given careful consideration. Some other things to be given consideration are the methods of communication to be utilized during the project. These are the technologies or methods used to transfer information back and forth among project entities. Different forms of communication will need to be utilized for communicating with different types of stakeholders and different occasions. For example, during a project team meeting it is appropriate to have a written agenda, but to conduct the meeting verbally. You could then follow up with written minutes to restate important points. On the other hand, purely written status may be sufficient for management or the PMO (Project Management Office).

Different assumptions and constraints that will affect the project also need to be carefully thought out. Once you have taken these factors in mind, then you can develop and document a communication plan that can be shared with your entire set of stakeholders, including team members, management customers and vendors. This type of methodical planning can lead to a carefully constructed project communication plan. Your plan should detail out the type of communication that will take place during the project, who will receive what type of information, where the information will be

stored, the schedule of communication such as status reports and project team meetings. For example, when managing a large project which spans multiple years, the project sponsors would want to be kept informed of the milestone status, but probably are unconcerned with the day-to-day issues that arise. A detailed and well thought out project plan will be extremely beneficial in setting expectations of the project stakeholders from team members to customers. Communication with stakeholders from start to the finish of a project is essential to all project management.

Once the initial communication guidelines and expectations of the project have been established, the communication plan can be executed. During the execution phase of the project the three main communication functions are information distribution, performance reporting and project control. "Information distribution involves making needed information available to project stakeholders in a timely manner. It includes implementing the communication management plan as well as responding to unexpected requests for information" (PMBOK, Project management institute standards committee, 1996, p106).

Some of the essential tools and technologies for information distribution are communication skills and information distribution system. Many of the project

deliverables and records result from this function such as meeting minutes and decision documents.

Various tools and techniques can be used for performance reporting such as performance reviews, variance analysis, traffic light reports, earned value analysis and trend analysis. The output that results from performance reporting are performance reports and project change requests that might be generated due to corrective action that needs to be taken to address a variance from the original plans or additional customer needs.

All of these functions are useful for project control. Keeping the project on track according to the project plan, budget and estimates that have been laid out is of prime importance. If the project needs to vary from any of these established plans, the project information distribution system should be utilized. The project stakeholders need to be informed and new expectations need to be set. Following a set of established project management processes can be helpful in identifying events that are not planned for. When unexpected events occur, assessing the impact and quickly communicating them to the affected people according to your established communication plan can efficiently address them.

Some simple things a project manager needs to keep in mind regarding how to communicate, are thinking

about what is to be accomplished via the communication, determining how to communicate, appealing to those being affected and giving and getting feedback. One of the biggest challenges I have faced as a project manager was when I was managing an international project. Part of my project team was located here in Troy, MI. The rest of the team was based in India. As a project manager I had to keep the two teams working well together, as well as accomplishing the project objectives. The team in India was new and did not have the same perspective on quality and timeliness of deliverables as the team in Troy. Most of the team members in India had been hired recently into the company and were still operating under the contractor mentality, instead of feeling any ownership in the company or the project. I tackled this difficult situation by conducting an orientation session that new employees normally go through in the USA. I also incorporated some training regarding timeliness and quality into this presentation. This had the desired effect of ensuring that both the teams communicated with the same level of understanding. This initial face-to-face communication helped me avoid many potential problems in the project. It also helped establish the Indian team members as part of my cohesive project team. A project manager can use

communication for information and control during the project.

During the completion and closeout phase of the project there are various communication functions. First administrative closeout needs to be done. Different companies may have different set of expectations of this. It may involve financial and contractual closeout. The project success should be documented and communicated. If your company has a PHDB (Project History Data Base), this should be populated with your projects information.

For longer projects, administrative closure may be done after every major phase. To be properly closed out the project deliverables need to be accepted and signed off by the customers according to pre-established criteria. "Lessons Learned" sessions should be scheduled to obtain feedback regarding the project from both customers and the project team. A third impartial group such as the quality assurance group or the PMO may facilitate a typical Lessons Learned session. The points captured from a Lessons Learned session can be used to improve future projects and avoid the same pitfalls in the future. Another important task during closeout phase is customer satisfaction surveys. Positive feedback from these can be used as a marketing tool. Any negative feedback can be used to make improvements. This also gives a voice to the customer.

It is clear that project success depends greatly on effective project communication. I have personally found that 90% of my project management time is spent in some form of communication. It may be within the project team or with the customers. I may be working on resolving the issue of the day, working on the overall project plan, solving interpersonal issues within the team or communicating the latest roadblock to the customer. Communication is the project manager's sword as he or she guides the project team through the jungle overcoming the various issues and roadblocks with an eye on the finish line.

References

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