

# Communication: The Lifeblood of a Project

By Ann Drinkwater

As blood flows, it pumps oxygen through the body to sustain life. Likewise, communication is the lifeblood of projects and organisations. Just as the heart works to distribute oxygen throughout the body, the project manager continuously circulates project information from the external stakeholders to the project plan documentation, to the internal stakeholders, to the project plan. This cycle of communication and information flow is iterative and continues throughout the life of the project. Without it, stakeholders and the project team can be left wondering where things stand and what decisions have been made.

The communication plan-like the project plan-is a necessary part of the project. However, when thinking of the project manager's role in communication planning, organisations and project teams too often think solely of the documents that establish the frequency, roles, responsibilities, recipients, and channel for which communication will be dispersed during a project. If you don't look beyond the written word and the outline prepared in the early phases of a project, you are setting yourself up for project losses. While you need to understand who is involved in the project, it is equally important to understand what information is needed and the level at which they need to receive it.

There are some definite musts for the communication plan. The communication plan should be scaleable and must be prepared based on the scale and depth of the project. Just as you wouldn't send out a SWAT team to catch a shoplifter, you wouldn't prepare an elaborate communication plan for a straightforward project that involves only a small group. Understanding the needs of stakeholders and developing an appropriate plan for communicating progress-information, successes, risks, and changes-is paramount. The operative word when creating the plan document is "appropriate." Be careful not to over-communicate irrelevant information, otherwise, stakeholders and the project team may become overwhelmed with information and disregard relevant future information.

The general rule I like to follow is to communicate information when its presence or absence will have some direct impact on project success. How does one identify when information will have a direct impact on the project? Typically if something impacts the scope, time, cost, risk, or quality of a task, this warrants escalating through the appropriate communication channels. It's not always clear to see if something will affect the critical path without performing some analysis, but for changes to pre-defined critical path activities, this is also an area that requires prompt attention and communication. Information that will impact the project-either good or bad-is vital to the project stakeholders.

In a similar vein, collecting relevant information from stakeholders is important. This information can be obtained standing at the water cooler or by more formal methods. However you gather it, once the information is received and validated, it should be analysed to determine the impact on the project. Any changes affecting deliverables or expectations should be discussed with all stakeholders and the necessary documentation updated and circulated.

Let's dig a little deeper in the area of expectation management. The art of communicating and understanding stakeholder needs as at the top of my personal list of drivers for project success, regardless of the size of the project. Scaling the communication plan appropriately to fit the audience is necessary for continued project buy-in and interest. The ability to communicate with individuals on various levels with various project interests is important for successful project management. You should become intimate with the needs and background of individuals involved with your project in order to relay an appropriate message to each member of the team, be it internal or external. Different individuals on the project team and those on the other end of the

project have specific desires and individual objectives they are interested in achieving. Keeping individuals interested in the project is all part of the process.

While the plan documents help establish some rigor in the process, be careful not to become too rigid and only allow communication at selected periods. If you notice that stakeholders are requiring more frequent communication, perhaps this is an indicator that the plan document needs to be updated as the project is not as straightforward as once thought. For smaller scale environments, additional levels of communication may involve in-person dialogue, whereas for larger, more geographically dispersed groups, this may involve more formal written methods. It's important to understand the communication styles of those involved with your project and to cater an approach that is most effective to your unique project and stakeholders.

Finally, give some thought to the delivery method. There are various channels to deliver project communication. Analysing your audience, the type of information being communicated, and the urgency of the information should all be factored in to the delivery method. Technology has brought us collaboration tools and document repositories for distributing project related communication. But be careful not to throw a tool at an audience and expect your job to be done. Tools are excellent supplements, allowing individuals to 'pull' information. However, imposing a delivery method that is inappropriate to your audience or the project may result in un-accessed information, which remains idle. In addition to making sure the tool and communication medium is appropriate to the areas already mentioned, the tool must already be accepted, heavily promoted, and fully integrated within your organisation prior to use.

The single most important differentiator I have seen to project success is communication. It requires an understanding of all facets of the project and keen intuition. Once a channel is established and information is flowing at the appropriate levels, trust can be established and true business problems solved. The success of a project and the perceptions of the stakeholders involving the project is on the line. The PM serves as the heart of the effort, ensuring everyone receives all pertinent information, so that the right decisions are made at the right time throughout the life of the project.

A project team flowing with effective communication is empowered to make more contemplative and educated project decisions. Remember, just as blood doesn't flow by itself, neither does communication. Both require interaction on the part of the team and stakeholders.

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