



# Obstacles to Project Communication

By **Kailash Awati**

Communication is so important to project success that it has been referred to as the lifeblood of a project by more than one practitioner. Jack Vinson talks about the importance of communication across project interfaces - interfaces being boundaries between different groups within an extended project team. He views interfaces as constraints that limit project success. On reflection, I realised that many project communication issues I've encountered have, in fact, occurred at interfaces. In this post I explore the notion of an interface as an obstacle to project communication.



To keep things concrete, I'll frame the discussion and examples in the context of projects in a corporate IT environment. For these projects the most common interfaces are:

- Between organisations (customer-supplier, for example),
- Between departments within an organisation (marketing-IT, for example),
- Between teams within a department (testers-developers, for example) and
- Within distributed teams (part of the team is in Boston and the other in Sydney, as an extreme example).

In my experience, the main communication obstacles (across interfaces listed above) can be boiled down three broad ones. I list these below with some pointers to how they might be addressed:

- **Political:** Whenever there are many groups involved, there's the possibility of vested interests and power games getting in the way of dialogue. Such political obstacles usually originate in the upper ranks of an organisational hierarchy, a step or two above levels at which projects are planned and executed. Project managers therefore need to make special efforts to be aware of the key political players in the organisation. In traditional corporate environments these might be functional or senior-level managers who aren't always obvious project stakeholders.

Once the political players have been identified, the project manager should take steps to gain their confidence and buy-in on project goals. This should help eliminate political barriers to project communications. In my experience, it is best to settle political issues at the level where they originate - escalating political problems up the hierarchy (i.e. to the manager's manager) generally doesn't help, and may even be counterproductive. Always keep in mind that political issues need to be broached with tact and finesse; inept handling can be a CLM. You have been warned!

- **Cultural:** I'll first deal with organisational culture, which is essentially the totality of assumptions and values commonly held within an organisation. Clearly, this can vary considerably between organisations - some may be more open than others, for example.

Communication at the interface between two organisations with vastly differing cultures can be difficult. For example, one might expect some differences of opinion at a joint project planning session involving a very forward-looking, can-do supplier and a conservative, risk-averse customer. Another example: in one organisation it might be considered perfectly natural for a developer to air a dissenting opinion at a meeting whereas in another it might not. Project managers can ease such difficulties by understanding the divergences in attitudes between the parties involved, and then acting as intermediaries to facilitate communication.

In geographically distributed (or virtual) teams, differences between regional cultures can come into play. These could manifest themselves in a variety of ways such as differences in fluency of language, or social attitudes and behaviours. Here again, the project leader, and the rest of the team for that matter, need to be aware of the differences and allow for them in project communications.

- **Linguistic:** Here I use the term linguistic in the sense of specialised terminology used by different disciplines such as Accounting, IT, Marketing etc. Often when specialists from diverse areas get together to discuss project related matters, there's a tendency for each side to make assumptions (often tacitly) regarding a common understanding of specialised jargon. This often leads to incomplete (at best) or incorrect (at worst) communication. An article I wrote some time ago provides suggestions on improving cross-disciplinary communication in projects. If done right, project communication can help align IT goals with those of the business.

A wise old project manager once told me that over ninety percent of project issues he'd encountered could be traced back to communication problems. I'm not sure I can vouch for that number from personal experience (I haven't counted, to be honest), but I'd have to agree that he's right in spirit, if not in number.

A shared world-view, which includes a common understanding of tools, terminology, culture, politics etc. - is what enables effective communication within a group. Project managers can facilitate a common understanding in their projects by analysing and addressing communication constraints at interfaces.

*Kailash Awati manages IT development at a multinational in Australia. Over the last several years, he has managed projects at companies ranging from startups to established firms. He has also worked as a business and technology consultant for companies in Europe and the US. On the technical side, he is a seasoned database architect and administrator with wide experience in designing, implementing and administering databases for transactional and analytical applications.*

*He blogs at eight to late, where he writes about project management and related topics. He also maintains a web presence at [www.orafusion.com](http://www.orafusion.com) where he writes (somewhat sporadically) on his professional interests, and publishes the occasional cryptic crossword.*