Inquiry of Communication

Why Do We Communicate?

Without getting into deep biological or sociological needs, the simplest answer is that the act of communicating is a characteristic or a desire that we all share. Whether intended or not, we constantly send out messages to everyone around us. The important thing to realize is that we have the ability to control and manage the way we communicate and how others receive our messages.

Aside from the general need to communicate within our social context. Why as project managers or professionals do we need to communicate? Below are five reasons we communicate in the business environment.

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Exchange Information

“This process may sound over simplified, but without the exchange of information, we would not be able to run the business or conduct ongoing operations. In order to exchange information effectively, you will want to have a plan in place and then implement the plan throughout the project.”

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Coach / Mentor Others

“We communicate to educate and coach others. Within the workplace, many of us manage people or have a manager that through day-to-day interaction receives some kind of informal or formal coaching. We may also have mentors assigned within our roles that rely on general conversation to guide us in our careers.”

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Resolve Conflict

“Often conflict, disagreements, arguments, etc., originate from a misunderstanding and one of the most effective way to resolve conflict is through communication. If you find yourself in a situation where you are trying to resolve conflict, it is important to practice active communication techniques such as intentional listening, asking follow up questions all while maintaining neutral body language. We will talk more about active and passive communication later on in the course.”
Negotiate

“Learning how to communicate effectively will help you in your negotiations. Some may cherish negotiations, while others may try to avoid situations that require negotiations. Either way, negotiations are nothing more than a conversation between two or more parties that require the exchange of thoughts, ideas, and opinions with the ideal goal of reaching an agreement between both parties.”

Influence

“The ability to influence others is one of the most important skills that you should try to learn as a project manager. There are many scholarly articles, self-help books, and business articles available that go into great detail on how to develop techniques to influence others. Broken down, many of these techniques have their origin in effective communication. Non-verbal (i.e., body language, positive gestures, and appearance) and verbal (i.e., tone and inflection) techniques all play a role in how others perceive you and ultimately how you may influence them.”

What is Communication?

As we begin to look at why we (as project managers) should be concerned with communication, we should first step back and actually define what it means to communicate. Since this is something we all do, I know I take it for granted and do not think about it every time I communicate to someone. This lack of thought, or awareness, is often why we find ourselves in a situation that may not be comfortable or say something we wish we had not said.

Ethics and Communication

As we begin looking at communication’s role in our projects, I also want to introduce the concept of ethical communication.

In its simplest form, ethical communication is the exchange of true and accurate information. Failing to practice ethical communication may lead to incorrect decisions, loss of respect, or loss of trust among individuals just to name a few. Unethical communication practices are more common in the workplace than we are aware of or care to admit. Examples are stating you have not read an email when you have, deleting a voice message without listening to it, or omitting information from a status report that may look bad for a certain group or individual.
You may not be aware that these examples are considered unethical. This is why I want to bring it to your attention during our discussion of the communication process. Having an awareness will allow you to practice ethical communication and coach your teams on its importance in the communication process.

Below are questions to ask while preparing a message to make sure you are practicing ethical communication:
Communication's Role in a Project

What role does communication play in a project? Better yet what impact does proper communication have on successful execution of a project? As the project manager, you have to be the driving force behind the execution of the project. Projects will not proceed on their own. How do you accomplish this? One of your greatest skills and abilities that you possess is that of communication. You will spend a majority of your time communicating (according to PMI up to 90%). The quality or effectiveness of your communication will also be evident in the way your project is executed. Poor communication will typically lead to poor project results while effective communication will typically lead to positive results. The article below discusses this very phenomenon:

Essential Role of Communications from Pulse of the Profession In-depth Report made available in 2013 from PMI.

As we previously discussed, we often find ourselves communicating to exchange information, resolve conflict, influence others, or to negotiate. Additional examples of communication’s role within the project environment include:

- **Bridging the gap between stakeholders:** In a typical project setting, there is a high probability that stakeholders will have different cultural backgrounds, organizational influences, interest, and expectations that the project manager will have to manage. Communication, when used effectively, will allow the project team to bridge these gaps and have influence on the project outcome.

- **Soliciting input and recommendations:** This is a critical component of any successful project manager. You will not be able to effectively execute a project without a project team and more importantly subject matter experts. It is crucial that you have a clear path of communication set up with the subject matter experts in order to gain their insight into the project.

- **Setting and managing expectations:** Setting and managing expectations is a key element to executing the project plan. As the project manager, what are you expecting from the team, the subject matter experts, or the customer even? Without the communication of clear objectives and expectations, the project will be ineffective.

- **Identifying next steps:** As with setting and managing expectations, it is important as the project manager to define what the next activities, next milestones, and next steps are.
Risks of Poor Communication

A quick search online for poor communication or failed communication brings up several studies within different industries on the impacts of ineffective communication. Several studies are available online that indicate poor communication may have life threatening consequences.

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**Healthcare**

80% One such study provided by the Joint Commission Center for Transforming Healthcare found that “An estimated 80 percent of serious medical errors involve miscommunication between caregivers when patients are transferred or handed-off.”

*Joint Commission Center for Transforming Healthcare survey (n.d.)* Retrieved 7/14/14

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**Technology**

28% In a survey conducted by the Computer Technology Industry Association and published online by Computer World, Rosencrance mentions that 28% of the 1000 professionals surveyed, stated that poor communication is the number one cause of IT project failure.


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**Real Estate**

40% Pinnington reviews a study conducted in Ontario between 1999 and 2009 and found that the most common cause of malpractice claims on real estate files are lawyer and client communication-related errors. This communication breakdown accounted for 40 percent of real estate claims within this period.

What we are able to gain from these studies is that communication is not industry or job specific. Everyone struggles with communication at some point. With this in mind, you as a project manager have the ability to make a huge impact on any project you are part of or manage.

Notes from the Field: Poor Communication is Not Always the Fault of the Sender

My department sends out frequent email updates on specifications and design criteria. One update included a paint strip being added to the front of the interior building wall. One of the new construction projects would be able to incorporate the update based on their current construction schedule. When the project was undergoing final inspections we noticed that the paint strip had not been applied. An inquiry showed that the project manager assumed the email was not important and did not read the design criteria update. In retrospect, the parties responsible for communicating the change need to follow up with the receiver and make sure they have received and understand the message.
Effective vs. Ineffective Communication

How well we communicate depends on several factors. Often through experience or feedback from others, we will determine how effective we are at sending the message to receiving the message. Typically, factors such as the timeliness or the urgency of the message, the medium, the method of delivery, and the level of confidentiality influence project communications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Ineffective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sender</td>
<td>• Determines the audience</td>
<td>• Incomplete or incorrect message</td>
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<td>• Uses multiple mediums</td>
<td>• Uses a single medium</td>
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<td>• Creates a clear message</td>
<td>• Inconsistent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Timely, concise, and clear</td>
<td>• Retains information</td>
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<td>Receiver</td>
<td>• Understands the message</td>
<td>• Not wanting to listen</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Relays the information</td>
<td>• Being distracted</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Active listening</td>
<td>• Passive listening</td>
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Active and Effective vs. Passive Listening

Being able to actively and effectively listen is a skill that project managers should take seriously and intentionally practice. Being able to do both will allow you to better communicate with each stakeholder, understand perspectives, mitigate conflict, and in return help you achieve the overall objectives of the project you are managing. Having the ability to listen well indicates that you understand what others have communicated. More importantly, you will be able to relay the information to others.

The major underlying problem associated with listening is that we only listen well when we want to or have an agenda; the challenge is being able to listen well when we do not want to. It is important to remember, that being a good listener does not mean that you agree with what the person is communicating or that you accept it, it just means you have heard what that person is saying. Active listening is the process of attempting to understand what the speaker or sender is communicating.

Have you ever intentionally tried to listen to someone, maybe turned your head slightly to hear better or make forced eye contact to see if you could better understand what they are saying. These are examples of active listening. You are actively engaged in the process and giving it your full attention. Effective listening is defined by Kliem as attempting to understand the perspective of the speaker and empathize, not sympathize (pg. 63).

Combined together, active and effective listening requires the full attention of the receiver and as Kliem mentions (using both sides of your brain). We are all guilty of having selective hearing or listening moments. It may be at work when a certain co-worker comes by or it may even be at home with your spouse or kids. By not being fully engaged in the conversation and actively/effectively listening there is a high chance for misinterpretation and coming to incorrect conclusions.
Barriers to Effective Communication

Earlier we looked at the communication process and briefly discussed factors that typically add complexity to it. A majority of the factors that we need to keep in mind or to look out for are categorized as noise. So what exactly is noise? Noise is any item that may impact or affect the degree of receptivity of the message.

The image below discusses ten different factors that can become noise or barriers to communication.

There are 10 barriers to communication. These are:

**Timing:** During the stakeholder analysis and identification process, you will want to identify and then agree to the stakeholder’s timing requirements. When the timing is known, you will want to make sure that time zones and work schedules have been taken into consideration. If you find that there is a large delta between two time zones or work schedules do not expect one party to accommodate the others schedule on their own. Be considerate and meet in the middle.

**Language:** Language has many attributes; you have tone, literal meaning, inflection in voice, etc. If your project is global or international, one of the most effective ways to mitigate the language barrier is to make sure you have a translator or a translation service that will equally serve both the communicator and the receiver.

**Relationships:** Due to the nature of projects involving many stakeholder, the potential is there for some stakeholders to have relationships that others may not be aware of. Or, if the relationships are public, they may influence the method and or medium that the communication is made. One of the most effective ways to identify these types of relationships is during the stakeholder interview process. As the stakeholders who they frequently interact with, what impact they have within their current role. If you begin to identify individuals within you list of stakeholders that have established interactions with other
stakeholders on your project, then you need to define expectations on how they are to communicate and respond regarding the project’s information.

**Personalities:** Some stakeholders may come across as grumpy or negative while others may always put a positive spin on messages. Either way, a balance has to be made so that the information is encoded and decoded in the correct manner and in the correct frame of mind.

**Beliefs/Culture:** Similar to language barriers, cultural differences have the potential to change the context of the message. When communicating it is best to stay within a factual context, use jargon sparingly and keep communication as clear and concise as possible.

**Distance/Setting:** Like timing, the greater the distance the more likely the message will become distorted or misinterpreted. Often, the greater the distance between stakeholders the more difficult it will be to effectively communicate.

**Technology:** As new technology is introduced among different cultures and generation groups, the potential for misinterpretation increases. Do not rely solely on communicating via email or other electronic formats. Often the receiver of an email may misinterpret the tone or intent of the message, and left unchecked, can easily be misinformed. It is a best practice to include face-to-face or verbal conversations along with email messages just to make sure the receiver has understood the message as intended.

**Body Language:** Are the individuals making eye contact, appear distracted or agitated? Does the person listening appear receptive? Are their arms crossed? These are a few of the cues that can be used to interpret body language. These along with others are important to learn and be able to mitigate as you are communicating. If you are in this situation and find that the other person appears distracted, it may be best to reschedule the meeting or ask if they need to attend to something and then get back with you at a more appropriate time.

**Poor Meetings:** Are the meetings that are being conducted full of side conversation? Do the meetings lack an agenda or have no follow-up? One of the most effective ways to prevent this from happening is to set clear expectations for everyone involved in the meetings. I have found that by sending a clear agenda of topics to be covered in the meeting invited, the people attending have an idea of how to prepare for the meeting. Then as the meeting starts, the first action item should be to go over a few meeting guidelines. State that laptops will not be needed and should be closed and that only one conversation should be occurring at one time. Then as the meeting progresses, if some of the ground rules are broken, simply pause the meeting until everyone has regained focus.

**Technical Talk:** When you have subject matter experts that are associated with a technical or professional group, remember to minimize the amount of technical talk within the project’s communication. The specific language may become a barrier for others.
Summary

During this lesson, we defined what it means to communicate as well as why we communicate. We also discussed how communication plays a central role in the execution of a project while also reviewing various communication methods, techniques, and tools that will benefit us as project managers. Some of the tools and techniques include being able to distinguish between active and passive listening, identifying communication barriers, and communicating effectively.