
Effective Communications for Project Management



Ralph L. Kliem

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Dedication

Priscilla, Tonia, Mom, Dad, Rambo, and Skipper

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Preface

Project managers spend at least 80 to 90 percent of their time communicating on projects. Time and again, however, studies by professional organizations and think tanks with an interest in project management have revealed that communications remains one of the top problems confronting projects in general and project managers in particular. Based upon what I have witnessed in my career, these findings are right on. Communications remains one of the major differentiators between project success and failure.

The reality is that projects don't just happen. To succeed, projects require a concentrated effort on the part of two or more people to communicate effectively. It is the job of the project manager to lay the groundwork for ensuring good communication occurs throughout the life cycle of a project. Just as importantly, it is the job of the project manager to make sure that good communication continues to the very end of a project.

In many respects, the quality of all output on a project depends on the effectiveness of communications. When communications deteriorates, a strong likelihood will exist that so does the quality of the deliverables resulting from the efforts of everyone on a project. Bad communications, therefore, often equates to bad results; good communications often equates to good results.

Most project managers might view that statement as common sense; apparently very little of this common sense exists on projects. Few projects finish on time, within budget, and meet requirements. Most miss two of the criteria and much of the time the dismal results are directly related to poor communications with many of the major organizations and individuals having an interest in the outcome of a project – the stakeholders.

It's unfortunate that communications on many projects tend to have the finesse of two heavyweight fighters talking to each other prior to a championship event at Madison Square Gardens. What communications that does occur seems to occur spontaneously and without any coordinated purpose.

In this book, I present the essential elements of effective communications on projects. These elements have worked for me and other project managers with whom I have had the honor to work with over many years. By applying all or even

a few of these elements on your projects, you will increase the likelihood of success many times over. By ignoring them, you will increase the likelihood of failure. In the end, it's your choice.

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About the Author

Ralph L. Kliem has over twenty-five years of experience with Fortune 500 firms in the financial and aerospace industries. His wide, varied experience in project and program management includes managing compliance and information technology projects and programs.

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Chapter 1

The Elements of Project Communications Management

Communications on a project is a challenging, ongoing process for a project manager and all stakeholders. Project managers, however, have perhaps the greater challenge because of their position. All communication flows through them and, often, from them (Figure 1.1). They are akin to a communications center that regulates the communications process.

Project managers are about the only ones who communicate regularly with many stakeholders at multiple levels within an organization. They communicate with immediate team members who are the ones who produce the deliverables for the final product. They communicate with functional managers, such as those at the first and second levels of the corporate organization, to obtain resources. They communicate with senior managers and executives regarding project status. They communicate with the customer from technical and general business perspectives to clarify information and receive approvals. They set up the communications infrastructure to support the overall project. It is quite easy to see, therefore, that the ability to communicate is a crucial competence that project managers must possess to expect a successful outcome for their projects.

Unfortunately, this competence on projects is rarer than people might think, as indicated by several studies.

According to a study by *Vital Smarts* magazine, 70 percent of 10,000 projects in Fortune 500 firms failed because people did not communicate that something

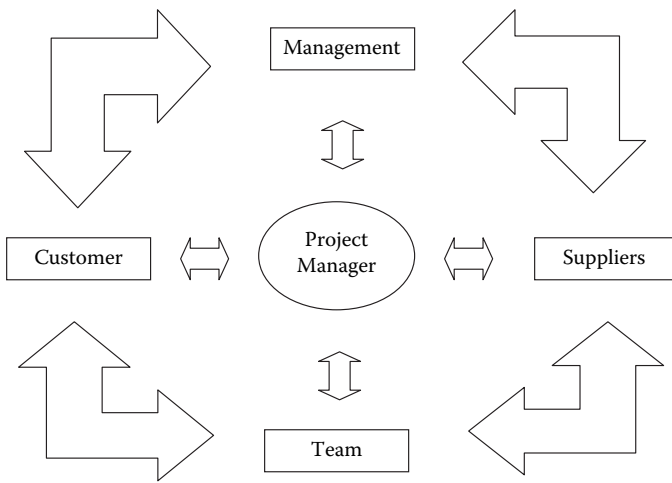


Figure 1.1 Project managers as linchpins.

was wrong, resulting in negative consequences from a cost, schedule, and quality perspective.¹

Another survey, focused on IT projects, reflected a host of specific problems associated with communications. The top ten concerns centered on communications about requirements: they were ambiguous, too overwhelming to comprehend, and inconsistent.²

Still another survey by the Center for Business Practice identified ten key management challenges, which included two problems with communications: limited visibility of activities and no project management information system (PMIS).³

BULL conducted a study that found 57 percent of project failures resulted from “bad” communications among stakeholders.⁴

These and many other studies are interesting in that they reflect, to a certain degree, project managers’ inability to inculcate effective communications in projects.

Communications problems, of course, are not unique to the project management environment; they are part of much larger organizations.

A study noted in *InformationWeek* showed that 30–40 percent of IT managers complain about communications-related data and information: receiving too much, no one sharing, and trying to decide what is current or has been previously received.⁵

Another study by Prewitt identified several contributors to the IT leadership failure. Most of them relate directly to communications failure: poor interpersonal skills, not acknowledging problems, and weak management skills.⁶

Regardless of the field they are in, it is fair to say that project managers face monumental challenges when instituting good communications on projects and

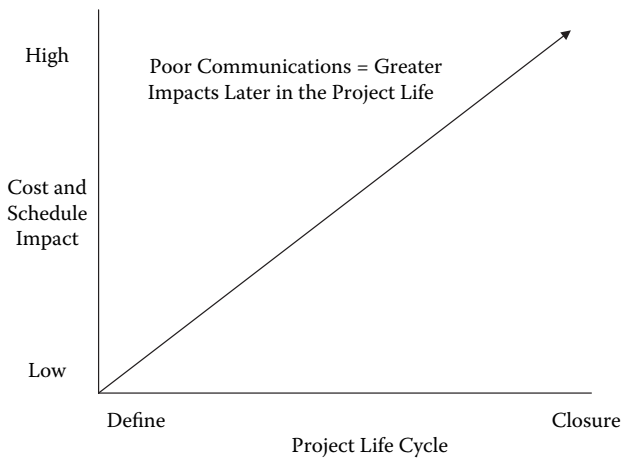


Figure 1.2 Bad communications equals higher costs.

wanting to become expert communicators themselves. The challenges become even more acute when dealing with global and geographically dispersed teams using the latest technology, and with stakeholders who must apply very specialized skills. Although all project management skills are critical, project managers must recognize the importance of effective communications on their projects. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that poor communications can result in poor application of skills in other areas.

What's worse, poor communications can have a costly impact on projects as they progress through project life cycles (Figure 1.2). When communications fail in the beginning, such as when assumptions and goals are being defined, the opportunity to correct the situation later becomes more difficult and costly. Projects gain momentum, and few people want to hold them up while ways are found to improve communications. Any effort to rectify poor communications can result in slowing momentum and causing rework. What's worst, the damage may not surface until the product or service is in production, leading to maintenance nightmares.

Five Basic Communications Truths Facing Project Managers

Unfortunately, project managers often misunderstand the complexity behind communications even though they spend most of their time communicating. Here are five self-evident communications truths that impact their performance yet are often overlooked.

Communicating is about people, not media. The reality is that many project managers think that the communications media they employ will solve any communications problem. Nothing can be further from the truth. For example, an e-mail does not produce clarity of communications any better than a pen. So the use of computers does not guarantee cooperation. What is important is the message and tailoring it to the appropriate audience. Unfortunately, many project managers apply media with the finesse of an unsharpened meat cleaver.

The fact is that communications require careful consideration. Communicating effectively requires determining who must receive the message, in what format, and when; it must include feedback to ascertain its effectiveness.

Communications are ongoing throughout the project life cycle. Unfortunately, many project managers seem to forget that fact. Often, they become engaged with technical concerns and overlook their pivotal role as the communications focal point of their projects. Perhaps, they communicate only during the earlier phases of a project and then trust the momentum of these first directions to take over and bring the project home successfully. Or just the reverse happens: they ignore communication during the early phases, thinking that only later will the need arise.

Project managers should realize that communication is ongoing, through all project phases. Communications don't cease until the project finishes, and, in fact, each phase provides its own need for exchanging ideas. Managers must keep everyone in touch and adapt their approach to meet the ever-changing needs of their projects.

Communications are affected by the context of the environment. Because the environment is in flux and the project represents change in itself, challenges to communications are ever present. These changes will impact a project manager's approach toward communicating. For example, under some circumstances, certain face-to-face meetings make more sense than virtual sessions; under other circumstances, it might be the opposite.

Many project managers, however, fail to consider the context of their environment. They frequently apply the same media or techniques to communicate. Often, the rationale is that if it worked on one project, then it should on another. One size fits all, from their perspective; the result is using a medium or technique in a way that is akin to putting a square peg in a round hole.

Communications occur in various forms and at different levels. This point is somewhat tied to the previous one. Not all media and techniques of communication are the same. Each one has its unique application and is geared to a specific audience. Stakeholders at the executive level, for example, have communications preferences and needs that are different from those of the core team. In the contemporary environment where an overabundance of data and information exists, the earmarking of communications media and techniques becomes even more important. Horizontal and vertical communications must be adapted to the needs of whoever is receiving the data and information.

The challenge for project managers is to adapt and be flexible when communicating. They must learn how to communicate to a wide variety of audiences to varying degrees of abstraction and specificity. They must choose the appropriate medium and tailor the messages to a particular audience. In other words, mass communications no longer work.

Communications is about information rather than data. Data, in itself, is meaningless. In fact, if more data is provided, the likelihood is that its value will start to decrease arithmetically and maybe even geometrically. The amount of data can become so voluminous that it becomes incomprehensible, drowning its victim. The result is not a paperless office but one with mountains of paper filling cubicles and offices. The separation of significant and insignificant data becomes indistinguishable.

Many project managers, often unwittingly, contribute to this flood of data. They think churning more data is better, serving as an indicator of productivity and progress. Unfortunately, it does just the opposite, obscuring anything significant. The key is to provide information, that is, data with meaning, in a format and level of abstraction geared to the right people. Information is processed data that serves some purpose, such as an indicator of a variance to the budget or schedule target of work packages. To provide information, project managers need to develop an effective communications plan that serves not only their own needs but also those of stakeholders. Essentially, project managers must function as intelligence professionals, separating significant information from the mass of insignificant detail.

Understanding the Communications Process

To communicate effectively, project managers must have a good understanding of the communications process (Figure 1.3). However, before describing the process, it is first important to understand some of its characteristics.

Communications is an integrated and interdependent process between two or more people. To communicate effectively, two or more people must be involved, one to send something and the other to receive it. These roles can change dramatically during the course of communications. The sender can become the recipient, and the recipient can become the sender. When communications occurs in this manner, a free flow of data and, more importantly, of information can happen. When the roles do not shift—that is, when the sender and receiver do not exchange roles—the communications process begins to deteriorate; the exchange of information declines and it becomes more of a process for distributing data rather than information. An exchange between the sender and receiver must occur if the process is to prove effective. Integration and interdependence are two essential characteristics for an effective communications process to occur. However, integration and interdependence are not enough.

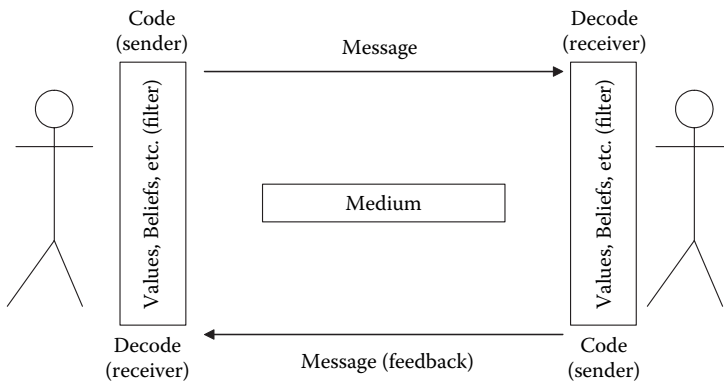


Figure 1.3 The communications process.

Communications is a complex, dynamic process. It never remains static, meaning that the sender sends the message and the recipient responds. Instead, the exchange between two or more individuals takes place over a period of time and a number of factors can affect how these people send and respond. At one moment, the approach and information may prove effective, and, at another, quite difficult. Many influencing factors and barriers can arise at one point in time and then may not even exist at another. Hence, a medium or strategy can work at one moment and totally fail at another. Internal (e.g., psychological) and external factors (e.g., organizational changes) can both add to this complex, dynamic process.

Communications is an ongoing, never-ending process. It never occurs just once but continues throughout the life cycle of a project. For project managers it remains an important function through the completion of the last task; even then, it may continue. To add to the challenge, project managers must adapt their communications to the unique requirements of each project phase and those of the different stakeholders.

Many project managers focus on one or two phases of the life cycle, usually those that interest them the most. The problem is that once communicating slows or ceases, it can become very difficult to restart it or make it effective in subsequent phases. If a lapse in communications occurs, the cohesion of the team, relationships with other stakeholders, and control of a project can weaken.

Communications is a subjective process. Although it is important to strive for objectivity, the reality is that communications is fraught with subjectivity. What a project manager decides to communicate, how he or she communicates—this is done in a manner reflecting one's choice and style. Subjectivity highlights what is or is not important to the communicators. The reasons for this subjectivity are not sometimes readily apparent until stakeholders have disagreements over what the project manager has communicated. The choice of medium and technique also reflects the beliefs, values, and preferences of the project manager, and that often lends itself to disagreement.

Ironically, many project managers think that their choice of medium and technique is an objective selection. However, that is not necessarily the case in the minds of others. For that reason alone, they should emphasize the need to apply effective and active listening skills, which are in short supply, and solicit feedback on what they communicate.

Communications requires considerable flexibility and adaptability. Because of the subjective nature of communications, project managers must be willing to maintain an open mind in what and how they choose to communicate. In one phase, for example, a certain medium might work; in another, it may fail dismally. Project managers must assess the context, be flexible, and adapt the medium and technique to achieve their goals and objectives.

Unfortunately, some project managers do not apply flexibility and adaptability in content or approach. What they communicate and how they communicate remind us of how Model Ts were produced on the early production lines: “You can have any color you want as long as it’s black.” The result is rigidity, with severe consequences. Stakeholders begin to disregard the project manager’s messages and start viewing them as administrative nonsense.

The Communications Process

To best understand the communications process, project managers must understand all the relevant factors. First, the communications process requires a sender and receiver. The sender formulates the message to communicate, which is meant for a receiver. The sender crafts the content with some intent in mind. The receiver, of course, receives the message and then deals with it according to personal reactions. He or she may accept, revise, or reject the message. For example, a project manager informs the customer that a slide on a major milestone will occur and provides reasons. The customer, in turn, may make a decision based upon that information.

Second, the communications process requires a medium to communicate the content of a message. The medium may take just about any form, each unique in its ability to influence the receptivity of the receiver. As with the message itself, the receiver may elect to accept or reject the medium employed. The receiver may even elect to alter the medium so that he or she can receive and interpret the message according to his or her preferences. In the earlier example with the schedule slide, a project manager may send the message as e-mail rather than have a face-to-face meeting with the customer.

Third, the communications process requires a message. The message can take many different forms, usually in hard or soft format. The hard format is usually paper whereas soft format is electronic. Regardless of format, a message is necessary to initiate a communication and stimulate a relationship between two or more