



## Effectively Managing Project Communications – Part II

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*Good communication is possibly the single most important ingredient of successful projects. Yet, as noted in the previous edition, successful project communications are not guaranteed by the existence of a communications management plan or sophisticated communications technology, including GroupWare and Intranets. If left to chance, people tend to either not communicate, or to miscommunicate (innocently or deliberately).*

### Corporate Communications Culture

Poor communications within an organisation will doom projects (and ultimately the organisation) to failure. The communications culture is created by many factors, most notable of which is the example set by senior management in rewarding, punishing or ignoring the communications behaviour of their staff.

The results of a survey conducted by the Council of Communication Management<sup>1</sup>, indicated that:

- 64% of staff don't believe what management says
- 61% of staff believe they are not well informed about company policy
- 54% of staff believe decisions are not explained clearly enough.

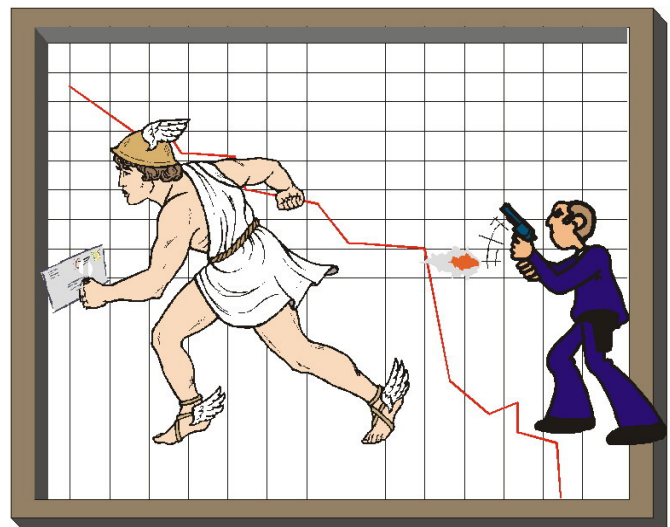
Typical symptoms of the above would be managerial beliefs that "Not everyone needs to know...", "Everyone will understand what I mean..." and "Silence means agreement...". Such statements are indicators of companies caught up in old-style bureaucracies.

Two specific communication habits are easily identifiable, namely the practices of shooting the messengers and building "knowledge dams".

### Shooting the Messenger

In ancient Greece messengers who brought bad news to the rulers were executed. Despite the obviously negative impact on morale and honest communications, the practice continues in many organisations today.

While the death penalty is not literally enforced, being the purveyor of bad news or admitting to errors can seriously impact the bearer's career. This may take the form of poor performance reviews, or subconscious negative perceptions levelled against individuals. Consequently, staff may try to hide or cover up bad news.



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<sup>1</sup> *Business Week*, 16 May 1994.

As with diseases, the earlier potential problems can be identified, the sooner remedial action can be implemented. Delays only make the situation worse. Therefore honesty and openness in communication are essential. Paying lip service to an "open door" policy is not enough – it must be backed up by visible action on the part of management.

The person who bears bad news or admits to having made a mistake should not be punished – by contrast the person who tries to hide it should be.

### ***Building "Knowledge Dams"***

Many organisations still operate under the concept of "need to know", and build up knowledge dams. The effect can be compared to the building of a dam and preventing any water from nourishing the earth downstream.

Knowledge is a source of power, and people are reluctant to share it. The traditional, individualistically based reward structures do not encourage information or knowledge sharing. However, in the rapidly evolving modern knowledge economy the absence of relevant information can be the source of failure, rather than success.



***Knowledge dams: The effect can be compared to the building of a dam and preventing any water from nourishing the earth downstream.***

Because people do not receive adequate knowledge, they either make poor decisions or have to pass them up the chain of command – leading to delays, while also perpetuating the belief that subordinates are incapable of making decisions!

The traditional organisation consisted of multiple layers of such information relayers (euphemistically called middle management), each compromising the integrity of information and adding to the proliferation of knowledge pools. The modern organisation must survive on fewer layers, and faster decision-making, preferably as close as possible to the coalface. Decentralised decision-making requires knowledge management and a shared vision of the corporate goals – *i.e.* effective corporate communications.

The late 1990s have seen an increased interest in the development of knowledge management systems. Increasingly sophisticated technological tools are available, but all too often the human and cultural dimensions are forgotten.

### **Electronic Communication Tools**

- Electronic Messaging
- Collaborative GroupWare
- Business Intelligence Tools
- Document Management
- Knowledge Management
- Workflow

## **Communication – Lifeblood of the Organisation**

“Information flow in a communication network is the lifeline of a business enterprise; it is like blood flowing through the veins and arteries of the body” (Samuel Eilson). Very few companies excel at communicating information across departments and projects. The discrete information living behind closed doors in marketing, sales, production, distribution, or for that matter within various project teams, needs to be opened to everyone in the company. Otherwise, organisations will founder and projects fail.

Managers who desire successful communications should ask themselves:

- Does my staff always have the right information at their fingertips?
- Do they waste time and effort looking for information?
- Is the information obtained consistent, up-to-date and in a useful format?
- Can information be passed on speedily in a useful form, or does it have to be reformulated?
- How do I deal with the bearer of bad news?
- Can my staff come to me with the freedom to make suggestions or discuss problems?

It is the responsibility of managers to ensure that they foster open communication environments within their organisations.

### **Team-based approach**

Just as traditional, hierarchical organisational structures are giving way to new team-based approaches, so too should the approach to management, knowledge sharing and communications. Among the primary changes are the devolution of decision-making to the people performing the work, and ensuring the open and honest flow of communication between all members of the organisation.

The importance of communication to project and organisational success cannot be over-emphasised. Technology and policies can improve communication capabilities, but cannot compensate for closed cultures or inabilities of people to exercise good communication skills. The final article in the series will focus on the core communication skills required by project managers.

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