

Effectively Managing Project Communications – Part III

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"Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me." These playground words of comfort are among the greatest lies, for the pen is mightier than sword. Words can harm, motivate, inspire, change destinies of countries – or of projects. Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Abe Lincoln and many other great leaders have recognised this. So do the managers of successful companies and projects.

Corporate Communications Culture

Communication is directly linked to the success or failure of projects, and will become more vital as competition and rapidly changing technology demand increased teamwork and knowledge sharing throughout projects and organisations. Consequently, the ability to communicate effectively is one of the primary skills sought by Human Resource professionals around the world.

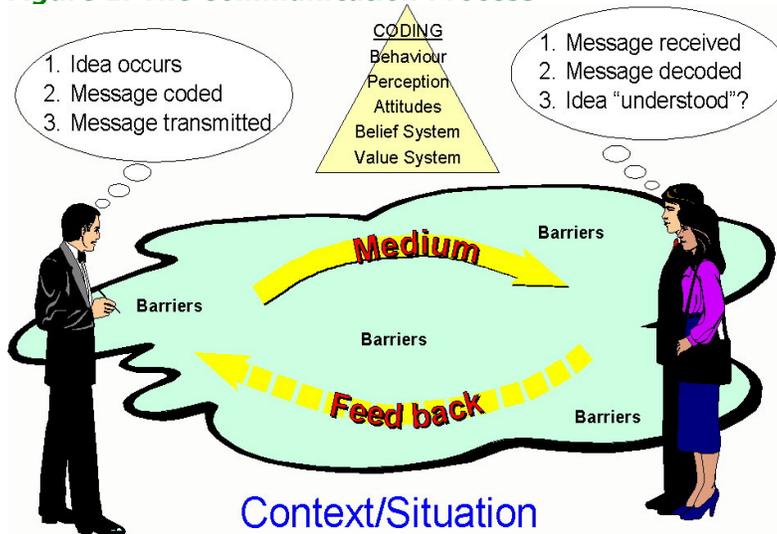
Effective communicators have a greater chance of personal and business success than those who do not possess these skills. Studies reveal that 40% of a manager's time is spent communicating – *i.e.* gathering and disseminating information – most of it verbal. Whatever the discipline, communication skills are an essential tool in every project manager's toolbox – yet it is also one of the most neglected areas in terms of skills development.

Understanding Communications

Communication is the transfer of information from a sender to a recipient. However, effective communication involves much more: senders encode their message against the background of their experience, while receivers decode messages according to their own experiences (**see Figure 1**). Consequently, the *intended* message is not necessarily the *received* message.

The clarity of messages is further distorted by a range of other barriers, such as the medium of communication and the context in which it occurs. An effective communicator needs to account for all of these factors in preparing communications.

Figure 1: The Communication Process



Interpersonal Communication Skills

Interpersonal communication encompasses four primary areas:

- **SPEAKING**

Public speaking is listed as the greatest fear held by the average person. However, speaking involves more than public presentations and after dinner speeches. People are constantly called upon to provide formal or informal speeches, participate in discussions, leave voice messages, make enquiries, motivate others, and so on.

The ability to rapidly formulate thoughts into coherent messages is one of the greatest skills that an aspirant project manager should wish to acquire. Hundreds of books are devoted to this subject, and practical hands-on training offered by organisations such as Dale Carnegie and Toastmasters are highly recommended.

- **READING/WRITING**

Reading and writing are learnable skills, but surprisingly few people take the trouble to master them. Reading involves the rapid assimilation of documents, and the ability to read into them the real intentions of the authors.

The scope of written communications has been significantly altered by the advent of e-mail. More managers now find themselves typing their own messages, frequently in single case, or with poor grammar or spelling. Their justification is that the message, not the form, is important. In some contexts this may be true, but as noted in Figure 1, form affects comprehension. Ultimately, communication reflects values and beliefs.

- **LISTENING**

While public speaking in the formal sense remains one of the greatest fears, informally people tend spend more time speaking than listening. Usually, as a person finishes talking, there is only a nanosecond delay before the next person begins. Some people are more adept at manoeuvring into the conversation than taxis on a South African highway in rush hour traffic.

However, listening is the most difficult skill of all to master because it requires attention to be focused on someone else. It requires taking a real interest in the communicator and his or her message.

- **QUESTIONING**

Managers can solve more problems by listening and asking intelligent questions, than by speaking. Questions indicate interest and attention, and can lead to greater clarification of the issues. More importantly, managers can use questions to lead team members to self-discovery.

Where appropriate, questions should be open, rather than closed, thereby giving the respondent scope to generate ideas and discover solutions. While it requires more time, it fits in with the modern perception of managers as coaches.

The primary activities in which a project manager engages on a daily basis are motivating staff, and dealing with conflicts or problems. These skills are a natural outflow of people who understand the context of communications, and have mastered the four areas of interpersonal communications.

Rules of Communication

- Admit it when you're wrong
- Exercise tolerance
- Meet people - remember their names
- Offer assistance readily
- Ask others for assistance
- Use tact
- Keep others informed
- Close/resolve problems
- Show appreciation
- Be a good listener
- Aim for win-win solutions
- Be willing to break with tradition
- Know what to expect from others
- Use personal (appropriate) media

Where an open corporate communications culture and the management of project communications plans accompany individual communication skills, projects have a far higher rate of success than is currently the case.

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