Article Category: COMMUNICATION

Seven Causes of Communication Breakdown – Part I
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Poor communication is far and away the most cited reason by project teams for their failures, so by understanding the origins of communication problems you can vastly improve your chances for success.

After asking these questions of 134 project teams, and then working with each team to improve their results, I began to realize that often what the team believes to be a communication issue is actually a symptom of the real problem — or root cause. When a team identifies their problem as one of poor communication, and then works to try and resolve the "poor communication" issue, I found that significant improvement could not be made. Only by understanding the root cause can you effectively work to solve the underlying issue.

Gleaned from 134 project teams, here are seven causes of communication breakdown. Next month's e-News will deal with the ways to prevent or overcome them.

1. Fear
Fear makes team members feel the need to protect their own interests. When we feel the need to protect we certainly are not going to be open, therefore communication is going to be stifled. Worse yet, our communication is likely to be an argument about why we are right and others are wrong. We feel the need to state our position and feel unable to solve even simple problems.

2. Misaligned Expectations
When the team members each have a different expectation on how things are supposed to work you have misaligned expectations. Most often it is over roles, responsibilities and authority. With misaligned expectations, no matter how hard each side tries, they just can't seem to get together. The team may be "communicating" but understanding is not happening.

3. Confusion
Where there is confusion, chaos will break out. Again, this can be over roles and responsibilities, or over processes. When people aren't sure what they are supposed to do, not only does the team lose productivity, there is chaos as people move around trying to figure out how things are supposed to work. This is true at all levels of the project. If a decision is made but no one understands how it is supposed to be implemented, then you will end up with different people implementing different solutions, leading to chaos and what appears to be poor communication.

4. Loss of Momentum
When everyone on the team is not in the boat, facing the same direction, and rowing toward project success, the project loses momentum. The more frustration there is, the more loss of momentum you will have. Frustration is caused when the team goes forward but keeps getting pulled back. Soon the project is behind schedule and communication switches to finger pointing, causing even more loss of momentum.

5. Dissatisfaction
Research shows that when project teams look forward to going to their jobs (the level of job satisfaction is high) the project is highly likely to be on time and on budget. When the project teams dread going to work, the project is in deep trouble. When a project is not fun to be on and a sense of dread appears, communication between project team members will be strained at best.

6. Lack of Commitment
When people aren't really committed to the success of your project you have "slack." This is like slack in a rope. You don't have a strong team focused on what it will take to succeed.

Inadequate resources can also cause slack. The project team loses faith that they can achieve the project goals. Lack of communication is usually the result.

7. Unconscious Incompetence
Inexperienced staff can face a very steep learning curve. Even one inexperienced person in a key role can cause havoc on your project. They just don't know what they don't know, so they focus on what is available to them: the specifications, contract, and drawings. They must learn how to resolve specific project problems as they occur. Often documentation becomes the focus instead of problem solving.

Sue Dyer is the creator of the Scorecard Program, a monthly measurement system that allows project leaders to assure that risks and issues are identified before they become problems and disputes. She is the first woman in the U.S. to head a major collective bargaining unit for the construction industry, author of the award-winning book, Partner Your Project, and president of OrgMetrics, a consulting firm specializing in non-adversarial approaches to preventing and resolving disputes

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