

Improving Project Communication



“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere”

*Lee Iacocca
former CEO of Chrysler*

Even in the age of cell phones, email and PDAs, poor communication remains one of the key reasons that projects fail. Just about any project failure list includes “lack of communication.” This statement doesn’t really explain the problem. In most cases, the communication events failed in some way to build the cooperative environment necessary to make the project successful. How can we improve the results of communication during a project? Expectations are high and the pressure is on. In order to do a better job, let’s examine the role of communication, how to plan for it and review suggestions on successfully delivering on the plan.

Role of Communication

Generally, communication is the transfer of information between or among people. During a project, communication efforts are expected to spread information about goals, tasks, status, explanations and impact. We rely on communication to help:

- Build buy-in
- Increase participant input
- Increase understanding of

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- requirements and concerns
- Reduce wasted time on misunderstandings or unnecessary meetings
- Identification of problems earlier in the project
- Encourage teamwork

The best example of the role of communication is to review a plan to initiate a project. In each of these objectives, information is required in order to achieve that objective.

Step Initial Project Planning

1. Define scope
2. Identify business drivers
3. Build requirements
4. Build a common vision
5. Identify current state
6. Identify desired state
7. Analyze gap
8. Develop implementation steps
9. Identify resources
10. Build a transition plan
11. Develop schedule
12. Build communication plan
13. Develop training plan
14. Define success measurements

Project managers include line items for communication to insure that there are milestones to mark significant information needs. As listed in step 12 above, the communication plan outlines how information is gathered and disseminated during the project. Since

the impact of a project is not limited to the project team, the communication plan identifies the distinct audiences and maps what types of information should be shared as well as the when and the how.

The audiences for project communications also differ in the type of communication that is required. Basic communication is bilateral, either informing another project participant or gaining information from another individual. This pattern is relevant to the audiences and the plan should be developed for each audience.

How to Plan for Communication

Communication plans begin with listing all involved resources, from those participating in the project to those impacted by the results of the project. As a first step to developing a communication plan that will work, it is critical to identify all of the target audiences. An audience list for an IT asset management (ITAM) project would be something like this:

- Stakeholders
- Executive sponsors
- Direct line management
- Detractors
- Employees
- Department management
- End users of the systems
- Process owners/participants
- ITAM system administration
- IT staff, including network, security, DBA
- Strategic planners for IT
- Purchasing and finance

When the audiences are identified, think about what type of information they require or can provide for the project. There will most likely be some common needs that can be used to group audiences and create a less complex plan. To evaluate these information needs a model of communication support is a helpful tool. The following model assigns a depth of information to the end result desired:

- Level One: Awareness

- Level Two: Understanding
- Level Three: Acceptance
- Level Four: Commitment

The more concrete results are related to increasing the amount of information provided. The model presumes that additional communication and thus understanding improves involvement in the goals of the project. From the constant demands for additional information, the model does seem like a good tool.

In the example below, a cumulative set of questions is offered to illustrate the levels of the model:



TOPICS TO BE COVERED BY LEVEL

Level 1

- Who is involved?
- What is it all about?
- Why should we do it?

Level 2 (includes 1)

- When is the deadline?
- How do we do it?
- Where do we do it?
- What do we get out of it?

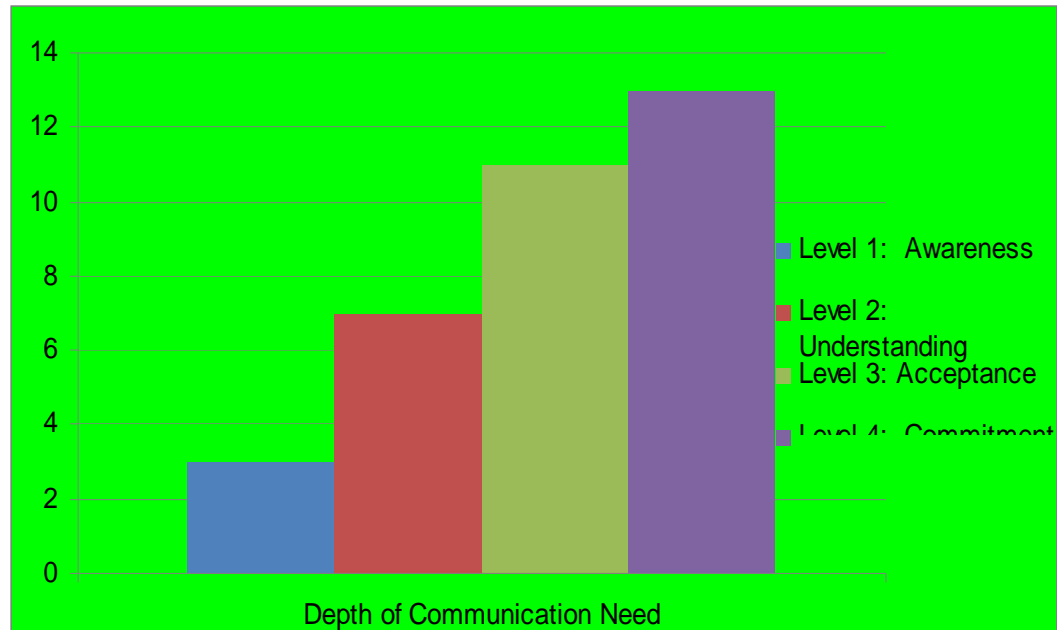
Level 3 (includes 1&2)

- What specific need does it address?
- What are the rewards?
- Where else has it been successful?
- What are the best practices?

Level 4 (includes 1, 2 & 3)

- What do we need to publicize, adapt, acknowledge, integrate, enforce, and/or standardize?
- What feedback do we need to provide?

Communication Support Model Example



How to Communicate

The table below lists commonly used communication methodologies, with some ideas on how to use them effectively. A good communication plan uses more than one type of communication and matches the method to the audience as well as the complexity of communication to occur.

Definition of Communication Methods

Communication Method	Used Effectively for
Email	Distribution of similar information to a specific group, one way communication, may generate questions, may require read acknowledgement
Status meeting	Updates stakeholders with progress and obstacles
Working meetings	Specified goals for meeting, set agenda, attain commitments for tasks, develop functional and cross-functional relationships
Survey	Feedback mechanism for voicing concerns after milestone or step attainment to ensure everyone is ready to move forward
Community meeting	General meeting to provide high-level understanding of project which ends with a question and answer period or survey
Webinars, Intranet training	General policy training, "How to" sessions
Training, Vendor	Training provided by the product vendors or professional associations. Provides grounding in the basics and increases individual success rates
Training, customized or Mentoring	Training provided in small groups or one on one focused on the organization's specific processes and automation

With the audience grouped by need and the communication methods laid out, the next step is to prepare a plan for each group. Identifying a plan by audience group allows the project manager to vary the communication method within a group and to match groups together when appropriate.

The chart below uses the techniques in this article to describe two audience groups:

Examples of Target Audiences

Level	Type	Job Descriptions	Global or Site	Communication Methods	Training Requirements	Requirements	Comments
4	Techs	System Admin, Security, Network	Both	Meetings, Email, Reviews	Technical, Knowledge Transfer	Enforcement, Policies, Procedures, Processes	Must be informed at all stages
2	Execs	Sponsor	Both	Meetings, Emails, Reviews	Knowledge Transfer	Executive Summary	Must approve all stage completions

For the communication plan, the information gathered about the audiences is used to place specific communication events on the plan. Once the plan is built and the events are delivered, the plan is used to document the delivery of the events:

Example of Communication Plan Timetable

Due Date	Method	Audience	Goals	Key Points	Developer	Deliverer	Completion
01/05/08	Community Meeting	All	Introduce Plan	Plan, Members, Timeline	John Doe	Jane Doe	01/04/08
01/10/08	Survey	All	Community Meeting Feedback	Measure support level	Robert Brown	Robert Brown	01/10/08

Avoiding Failure

The key to a successful project is effective communication, an attainable plan, and providing people with the proper level of support, training, and knowledge to do the job well. Shortcuts in these areas lead to discouraged participants who may be prevented from understanding the full potential and benefits of the project. Goal attainment is threatened and complaints at project end will overshadow any successes gained.

This communication planning methodology described can help eliminate common sources of failure such as:

- Not planning at all, or not executing communication events
- No diversity in communication methods
- Delivering the wrong message to the wrong audience
- Incomplete change process mid-project.

In short, there are no shortcuts to a successful project but there are great benefits available to those who invest the time and effort required to do a project right.



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