



Effective Project Communication Management

Jyothi Goudar

Overview

Communication is among the more important factors for success in project management. Communication is the fuel that keeps the project running smoothly. A research study has found that the three major factors related to an information technology project success are:

- User involvement
- Executive management
- A clear statement of requirements

A failure to communicate is often the greatest threat to the success of information technology projects. All of these factors depend on having good communication skills.

This white paper will highlight key aspects of:

- Effective communication
- Project Communication Management
- Communication Process
- Improving Communications Management

Importance of Effective Communication

Communication is the glue that holds a project team together. Communication is not just talking. It is also listening. Without clear, timely, unambiguous communication, even a small team working together will have major problems. In the case of a virtual team, poor communication will render an already challenging situation nearly impossible to control.

The project status needs to be tracked and monitored effectively using various tracking tools. He/she should ensure timely and appropriate generation and collection of information. He/she should follow email ethics during formal written communication. Being precise and clear while communicating helps achieve better understanding. The law of success says

35% Hard skills + 65% soft skills = 100% success

(Statistics courtesy – Harvard Business School).

As a project manager, one should know there are potentially hundreds of communication channels. The larger the project, the greater opportunity for communications to break down. Here's a nifty formula to find out how many opportunities there are for communication to fail:

$(N*(N-1))/2$.

That's N times N-1 divided by 2. N represents all the key stakeholders.

Effective communication includes a well-designed infrastructure and the processes, messages, and documents that use that infrastructure to exchange information among project stakeholders and keep them aligned with the project goals and informed of the project's progress.

Project Communication Management

The goal of Project Communications Management is to ensure timely and appropriate collection, storage, distribution and generation of project information.

Communication is so important on projects that it is an integral part of a successful project. Every project should include a communication management plan – a document that guides projects communications. This plan should be part of overall project plan. The type of communication will vary with the needs of the project.

An effective Project Manager spends most of her/his time in Communication. According to the PMBOK guide, a Project Manager spends 70-90% of her/his time in communication during a project. Communication Management needs to be planned during the beginning of the project. Communication Planning involves determining the information and communication needs of the stakeholders;

- Who needs what information and when
- What type of information will they need and in what detail?
- What will your goal be when you communicate and how the information be provided to them

Who

Effective communication therefore, involves making prior decisions about who needs to receive the information. Information should be as clear and direct as possible, limiting areas in which misinterpretation could arise. A good understanding of the audience using terms and language they are familiar with is vital. Therefore a Project Manager should be an Effective Communicator.

Keeping the stakeholders regularly informed is a critical activity for any project team. Whether it's through project status reports, regular meetings or informal email, one can ensure that the right messages are distributed about the progress of the project. This will help the project team and the external stakeholders to remain focused on delivery and to provide all the support required to deliver the project successfully.

What

Usually the major communications needs will be obvious; functional managers need to know information related to their employees on your project, such as schedules and time accountability. The project sponsor and key stakeholders need information on the project status, finances, and any variances in cost and time. You'll need to work with your project team and the stakeholders to determine the more involved communication demands.

When

You'll also have to tackle the "when" problem. Depending on the stakeholders, information needs vary between daily, weekly, monthly, and "based on conditions in the project." For example, the project stakeholders may ask for weekly status reports, but the project sponsor may ask for status reports just once a month. The secret is to schedule and, if possible, automate the communication demands as much as possible.

If a project management information system is worth much, the communication process can be automated through macros, templates, or even auto-generated reports on a regular schedule.

Many project managers don't schedule, and don't use a communication matrix. Often the situation becomes that he/she may forget who needs what, and when they need the information provided to them.

Escalation

Set up an Escalation Procedure for rapid communication with upper management when a project begins to run over cost or schedule, or rapid decisions need to be made in response to internal or external changes. This escalation should determine which level of upper management to contact depending on the degree of variance from the project plan. Some communications can be accomplished in a quick email. Others require an extensive spreadsheet, report, and executive summaries. Some communication is expected in quick, ad-hoc meetings, while other needs may mean business suits and, PowerPoint slideshows. The point is simple: Give stakeholders the information they need in the modality they'll be expecting.

Communication Process

A Communication Process, or Communications Management Process, is a set of steps that needs to be adopted for every project in an organization. A Communications Process can be undertaken as part of Communications Management and it helps to ensure that the stakeholders are kept regularly informed. For example, as part of the project life cycle, the team implements a Communication Process to make sure that the entire team is kept informed on the status of the project.

If the right people have to be kept informed with the right information, at the right time, then this process needs to be adopted.

The Communication Process will help to:

- Identify the information that needs to be communicated
- Determine the target audience for communication
- Decide on the communication format and timing
- Draft and gain approval where required
- Communicate the message, through formal communication channel
- Gather feedback and improve the project communication processes

By using this Communication Process, one can:

- Clearly identify the project stakeholders
- Identify the stakeholders communications needs
- Ensure the right people receive the right information at the right time

A Communication Process should be used when you wish to communicate formally within an organization. By using the Communication Process, you can ensure that no miscommunication occurs. As part of the Communication Process, you can also receive feedback on the communications, which have taken place and also ensure that future communications are improved.

Communications Management is a fundamental part of any organization and needs to be treated with care. Using this Communications Process, you can communicate effectively at all times.

Improving Project Communications

You've seen how a good communication is vital to the management and success of information technology projects. It is also explained above the importance of project communication management, which can ensure that the essential information reaches the right people at the right time. Some of the areas to be considered for improving project communications are:

- Communication skills to resolve conflicts
- Developing better communication skills
- Using templates for project communications
- Developing communication infrastructure

Communication skills to resolve conflicts

It is crucial for project managers to identify and resolve any kind of conflicts in projects. Conflicts could be due to project priorities, technical issues, project issues, personalities, staffing, procedures and process. There are five basic modes for handling conflicts as mentioned below:

Confrontation Mode: When using confrontation mode, the project manager will directly face a conflict using a problem-solving approach that allows them to work through the disagreements. This approach is also called as problem-solving mode. It is a win-win situation mode and is the most favoured mode used for conflict resolution.

Compromise Mode: With the compromise mode, the project manager uses a give and take approach to resolve the conflicts. In this both the parties will bargain and search for solutions that brings satisfaction to some extent.

Smoothing Mode: With the smoothing mode, project managers will place emphasize on areas of agreement and avoid areas of disagreement.

Forcing Mode: With the forcing mode, project managers will force their viewpoint. It is a win-lose situation and managers who are autocratic in nature favour this mode.

Withdrawal Mode: With the withdrawal mode, project managers will withdraw from a disagreement. This approach is least desired.

Research has indicated that confrontation mode is most widely used for conflict resolution followed by compromise mode. Successful project managers are less likely to use the other 3 modes for conflict resolution.

Developing better communication skills

Most companies spend a lot of money in conducting technical trainings and give less importance on soft skills training like communication training. It is quite rare to find information technical professionals with the ability to apply both good technical and communication skills. Communication skills are the key to advancing their careers especially if one wants to be a good and successful project manager.

Communications skills training include role-playing activities in which participants learn concepts such as building rapport. It takes leadership to help improve communication in employees. Senior management shouldn't let their employees write bad documents, sloppy reports, give horrible presentations or conduct meetings with no proper agenda/objective. Often people complain about the time they waste in unnecessary or poorly planned and poorly executed meetings. Meetings conducted with the team or client can be made effective by following some simple guidelines as listed below:

- Define the purpose and outcome of the meeting
- Determine who should attend the meeting
- Provide an agenda to the participants *before the meeting*
- Prepare handouts, visual aids related to the discussion if required before in-hand and distribute to the participants
- Execute the meeting professionally
- Build relationships

Senior management should expect high expectations and be a role model. Organizations should allocate time and budget for conducting trainings, provide staff to assist in relationship management and include time in projects to have informal meetings with clients to help develop relationships.

Like any other goal, communication can be developed better and improved with proper planning, support, and leadership from senior management.

Using templates for project communications

It is important to prepare and store project related templates and guidelines for common project communication items such as project charter, project description, status reports and so on. Good documentation from previous projects could be a good source. It will be helpful to people who are not experienced and new to projects and also for people who are not good at documenting.

To make it even more convenient to use templates, the organization should provide the facility of templates being available online. The team should understand the senior management's, or stake holder's or customer's documentation expectation for each particular project. Hence if required, session should be given to the team to provide awareness about the templates, the documentation standard's to be used and the availability of documentation guidelines.

Developing Communication Infrastructure

A communication infrastructure is a set of tools, techniques and principles that provide a foundation for the effective transfer of information among people.

Tools include e-mail, project management software, fax, telephones, online chat, videoconferencing systems, teleconferencing systems, document management software and so on. If the project team is not co-located (which is increasingly common) video conferencing is good, followed by phone calls. After that, Instant Messaging (IM) has its place, and then comes email. Email is asynchronous, meaning that it works in one direction at a time, and whilst it has its place, especially when working across time zones, it should not be the primary communication method.

Techniques include reporting guidelines, templates, meeting ground rules and procedures, emailing guidelines decision-making processes, problem solving approaches, conflict resolution techniques, and root cause analysis. Communication is a two way street, and the PM needs to ensure that traffic flows freely in both directions. Listening and observing non-verbal cues is at least as important as talking, and this highlights the need to actually see team members. Particularly at launch, it's a good idea to get everyone together. Personal contact helps build relationships that lubricate the flow of information.

As the project progresses, the PM should monitor the status of each activity, especially those on the critical path. It's essential that he get early notice of any possible problems so that he has the opportunity to take corrective action before the situation deteriorates any further. The best way to learn about problems is through informal face-to-face conversation, which is easily achieved while "Managing By Walking About" (MBWA). Seriously, the PM should make a point of walking through the team office on a daily basis and chatting with everyone to ask how things are going.

Principles include providing an environment for open dialogue using straight talk and following an agreed upon work ethic.

Lastly, to mention it is challenging at times to install a well coordinated and effective project communication system. The vital job has to be planned meticulously to be efficient enough for the short time. Better communication capabilities are necessary for successful results of the project. Make sure to give due attention to communication tool, medium, responsibility, goals, recipients and regularity. It's not essential that all the information pass through the PM, in fact to avoid delays it's probably best that it doesn't, but to stay in control he or she must be able to tap in to these flows.

By implementing these key aspects, you will definitely be successful in providing an efficient communication system to your project.

Conclusion

I have highlighted the importance and criticality of effective Communications Management for the success of an information technology projects. As a Project manager, it's not just sufficient to do the planning and execution of a project. There is a lot more to it. A successful project manager should be an "*Effective Communicator*" as well. They should have "soft" skills associated with successful leadership. These above highlighted points won't guarantee success, but they will help you get a solid handle on your project and ensure that you're doing all you can to make it succeed in a crazy world.

This article is written based on my personal experiences in the different aspects of project management and hopefully it benefits all of you in adopting a good and effective communication management in your projects too!

The Author

Jyothi Goudar works as a Manager at Manhattan Associates, Bangalore, India.. She is a highly motivated and goal oriented person. Jyothi comes with 11 years comprehensive experience in the IT industry. She is an effective communicator with strong skills on project management.

Jyothi has experience in managing multiple projects effectively including planning, estimation, risk, communication and release management and interfacing with customers. She is a PMP certified professional from PMI.

This is her *earlier published white paper* on Project Perfect site:

http://www.projectperfect.com.au/info_project_management_expertise.php

About Project Perfect

Project Perfect is a project management software consulting and training organisation based in Sydney Australia. Their focus is to provide organisations with the project infrastructure they need to successfully manage projects.

Project Perfect sell “Project Administrator” software, which is a tool to assist organisations better manage project risks, issues, budgets, scope, documentation planning and scheduling. They also created a technique for gathering requirements called “Method H”™, and sell software to support the technique. For more information on Project tools or Project Management visit www.projectperfect.com.au