



**Project Management
White Paper Series**

Who says?

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Who says?

by Keith Fournier

Introduction

Communication is vital to the success of a project. However, it is an aspect that is often overlooked during the planning process. The project manager is communicating 90% of the time during a project. This communication centers on managing expectations and solving problems. The other 10% of the time is preparing to communicate through meetings, presentation and reports. Effective project communication is the responsibility of the project manager. Therefore, the project manager must have excellent communication skills, as well as the necessary technical skills to lead a project successfully.

Project communication can be categorized into two types: formal and informal. All project communication should be conducted through the project manager and is considered formal project communication. All other forms of project communication are considered informal. Informal communication can be characterized as direct discussions, email, or phone calls among the vendors, project team, sponsor, users, steering committee or any project stakeholder. These types of communication should often happen in project. However, for it to be officially part of project plan and policy, it should be directed through the project manager. This will allow the results of the discussion to be documented and evaluated for potential impact. Therefore, the project communication plan should identify audience, methodology, and frequency of formal communication. This plan includes many aspects of the communication process including types of reports, content, frequency, audience, format, and distribution method. However, this represents only the "hard copy" communication and correspond to only a portion of the of the project manager's communication responsibility.

A project manager's most difficult task is to manage the expectation of the project stakeholders. Project stakeholders include everyone that may have a positive or negative impact from the outcome of the project. Stakeholders typically include project team members, project sponsor, steering committee, and users. For many GIS projects, the stakeholders often include the general public. As a result, the project manager must be able to disseminate information to a wide variety of audiences. These audiences may expect highly technical and detailed reporting, but could also desire general information about project results, cost and schedule. The general audience may include senior management, elected officials or the public. Therefore,

it is wise to plan to provide pertinent and timely information to satisfy everyone's desire.

Skills Toolbox

To effectively communicate to the varied project audience, the project manager must possess diverse skills. These may be skills seldom practiced by a new project manager. Technically competent people are often promoted to become project managers. However, technical ability is considered a "hard skill." The challenges with project communication occur because it evokes "soft skills." Soft skills are defined by sociologist as the ability to deal with people's cluster of personality traits, such as personal habits, social skills, personality, attitude, and their facility with language. This is where it starts getting hard. Just because a project manager says something, does not mean that anyone heard it. Hearing the message correctly insinuates the audience heard what you wanted to convey. Effective communication can be hindered by the words you use, how you say it, and a multitude of environmental influences. The difficulty with soft skills occurs because of too many uncontrollable variables. You know what you are trying to say, but the filters of completely different experiences, abilities, knowledge, personalities and motives, may distort messages. The most difficult variable is the listener's perception of your intent. For a technical person that uses and embraces logic, managing people often has nothing to do with logic. As Dr. W. Edward Deming has been quoted, "management is the ultimate liberal art."

Communication Channels

The dynamics of communication are daunting. Confusion in managing a project can occur because of all the informal interactions among stakeholders. These communications cannot be eliminated, but can be managed. The project manager should act as the center of all formal project communication and typically acts as the "point" person when working with vendors. This communication structure is usually requested by the vendor to minimize the communication channels. Communication channels in a project can be calculated by using the communication model formula:

$$\text{Project Communication Channels} = n(n-1) / 2$$

n = number of members on the team

For example, a project with 5 members has 10 possible channels of communication. There is an assumption in the model that everyone on the team can talk to everyone else. That does not sound too bad.

However, when the project team has 20 people, the potential communication channels increase to 190. As the size of the team increases, the number of communication channels increases exponentially. Informal communication occurs directly between team members, users, vendors and other stakeholders. This is where trouble can begin. It does not take long for a rumor to become perception and ultimately their reality. That is why the project manager must be an excellent communicator being able to provide enough information on a timely manner to all stakeholders on the project.

Team Dynamics

Projects are, by definition, unique endeavors that produce a documented result in a finite period of time. Therefore, projects are fraught with peril. This creates fear within the community of stakeholders. Much of the opposition, doubt, resentment, subversiveness and general concern during the implementation of a project are generated from fear. This fear typically germinates from the worry of failure. This emotion can grow to a fear of being fired and ultimately relates to the fear of not being able to “pay for their stuff.” However, a project manager’s duty is to be a change agent and deal with these anxieties. The project manager is responsible to manage the expectations of the team, client, vendor, sponsor, steering committee and others. If the project manager does not provide enough information in a timely fashion, information will be magically created and disseminated through the informal information channels or the “organizational grapevine.” Remember, perception is reality and if you do not change perceptions to be positive, the project will be challenging, at best.

Got Politics?

Has anyone had to deal with politics? The term, politics, typically has a bad connotation. However, politics can be defined as “getting people to vote for you.” The voting does not have to be an actual vote. It can just be people supporting your goal to successfully complete the project and be part of the winning team. This can be accomplished by negotiating. Everyone has a motivation for doing anything. Your job as a project manager is to negotiate to ensure everyone’s motive is satisfied. Common items needed for the project are management support, project funding, human resources, completion schedule, equipment, and adherence to project scope. These tend to be easy. The hardest to negotiate are suitable conditions for project success. Most importantly, having the stakeholders to be engaged and committed to the project. To get this commitment, the project manager should establish a plan for project communication that includes verbal and hard copy information.

Project Communication Methods

Typical methods for project communicating are reports and meetings. The project manager dreads both. Why? Reports take a long time to create. It consumes a great deal of time to gather the pertinent information, format properly and write the summaries. Another despised task is presiding over project meetings. If not properly handled, meetings can become a complaint session. As mentioned, project managers may have excellent technical skills, but tend to initially lack adequate experience. Communication planning can mitigate that lack of experience. The plan will outline and establish the information and communication needs of the stakeholders. This process will help satisfy the who, what, where, when, why, how and how much, questions faced by the project manager. Since project communication is for the stakeholders benefit, the project manager should start out by asking them what they want. Get their input.

Written Reports

The written communication will provide historical artifacts and can be used to develop project “lessons learned” archives. These can be valuable for future projects. There are three types of standard reports in project management: progress, status and forecast. The progress report provides details on project accomplishments since the previous report was published. Status reports state the current condition of the project including budget, schedule and scope variances. Forecast reports should indicate Estimate To Complete (ETC) and Budget To Complete (BAC). All of these should be done weekly and contained in one document. It may look like a lot of work. However, once the first report is created, it can be used a template for future documents. Additionally, it will force the project manager to focus on the condition of the project, be proactive on identifying and resolving issues. Project sponsors expect problems on projects. No project ever is completed without some issues. However, what project sponsors do not want is a surprise!

Project Meetings

Meetings can be an excellent way of communicating with the project team. But meetings can also be absolutely unpleasant and digress rapidly. To minimize this possibility, the project manager should have a stated agenda, be a strong facilitator and adhere to a strict time limit. Furthermore, meetings cost money. The project manager should be sensitive about the total cost of a meeting. It can be estimated by multiplying the loaded cost for each resource in the room by the duration. This cost can rapidly increase if consultants are participating. The longer the meeting, the more it

costs and less gets accomplished on the important things, such as the completion of project activities. Therefore, project meetings should have a stated purpose, written agenda, specific length of time and only necessary participants. Items on the agenda should be in order of how many participants are needed to discuss the topic. For example, start the meeting with items that all need to discuss. As the meeting continues, dismiss members that do not need to be involved with the remaining items. Also, if a conflict occurs, state the issues, determine who should be involved, and move it off-line. Another trick to keep meetings short is to have “stand up” meetings. Not standing meetings. Standing meetings are ones that happen regularly. In stand up meetings, nobody sits down. These are good for quick daily status updates. Meetings and reports are valuable tools used in project communication. But the next question is how much and when?

Information Overload

It has been said that the project manager can never over communicate. This is a false statement. Have you ever received daily emails on project status or issues that are 2-3 pages long with several large attachments? How many times do you really read all of it? Most of us will take a quick look at the first few sentences of the email content and wait for the status meeting to find out what it contained. The key to good communication is being able to consolidate the situation, provide alternatives and make a recommendation. Why do you think that reports and articles often have an “executive summary?” That is all that may be read. If more detail is needed, do you think the readers will read all of the attached documents? No. It is more likely for you to get a call.

Keith's 3 Rule

Keeping communications simple can be challenging. The rule seems to be “the more the better.” However, it should be the opposite. Sometimes it is best to create a rule of thumb to assist in remembering how to deal with certain situations. For communicating, I have created a rule. This rule can apply to execution team members, sponsors, steering committee members (and even friends). It's called Keith's 3 Rule.

My rule states that a communication engagement should be limited to 3 items, limited to 3 minutes, and conveyed at 3rd grade level. This rule is certainly not intended to be derogatory. It is just a rule of thumb to use. Most people can deal with three issues at one time. Any more than three and a person can become overwhelmed and shut down. If you have more than three items, rank them for importance and discuss the

three at the top of the list. It is unlikely to get past three issues in one conversation. The three minutes rule can be used for both verbal communication and written. A well-written one-page memo should be able to be read in about three minutes. As for the last condition, third grade level, this reminds you to leave out the “techie” speak. It will minimize the feeling that the project manager is talking down to anyone. It is very likely that many of your sponsors may become intimidated or frustrated with highly technical diction. Always keep project communication specific and succinct. Get to the point and move on.

Visibility

Project teams like to see the project manager being engaged in the project. Being physically visible and in personal contact with team members will help morale and communication. One method of being immersed in a project is sometimes called “management by walking around.” This could be modified to “management by scaring people” (MBSP). This is not meant to be intimidating. However, the basis of this concept is to not only walk around and be seen, but also ask critical questions and gather project intelligence. This method allows the project manager to get a real feel for the condition of the project. Project managers should always be asking questions and more important, actively listening. However, team members may only provide you information that you want to hear. Have you ever experienced the percent done is in direct proportion to the estimates from the project plan? Issues and delays are often revealed just before a deliverable is due. This is manifested by an estimated percent done that includes a tenth of a percent. For example, a particular module is 99.5% done. The next week it is 99.6% complete. As a rule, the project manager should not waste time collecting estimates of work completed. The important question is if the deliverable will be completed as planned. If not, what can be done to help?

Guidelines

To successfully manage stakeholder's expectation, a project manager should consider implementing the following items on their projects. It will help to minimize anxiety and improve the probability of project success.

- 1) Constantly improve written and presentation skills.
- 2) Plan for communication prior to the beginning of the project.
- 3) Ask stakeholders for input on content and frequency of reports and meetings.
- 4) Hold weekly status meetings.
- 5) Have written meeting agendas.

- 6) Consider the “standing meeting” format to shorten meeting durations.
- 7) Document project status weekly in writing.
- 8) Document the escalation path for project issues.
- 9) Remember Keith’s 3 Rule.
- 10) Keep communication simple, but be prepared with the details.
- 11) Be visible and approachable.
- 12) Beware of only using performance measurement techniques to determine project status. As a project manager, you should be intimate with the project’s details. Your ability to interpret the results is critical to manage stakeholders
- 13) The project manager is ultimately responsible for project communications.
- 14) Continually manage the expectations of the stakeholders.
- 15) Plan for all formal communications to be funneled through the project manager.

Conclusion

Project management is not for the faint hearted. Projects will always encounter problems. The way to have successful projects is to anticipate problems to mitigate their impact. When problems occur, it should be communicated to the right people in a specific format with little time lag. Remember; do not hide any problems, they never go away and only seem to get bigger. This goes back to an earlier article saying to “disappoint early and disappoint often.” It is important to have credibility and be truthful to all stakeholders. The project manager will gain much more respect from your team in the long run.

About the Author

Keith Fournier, PMP, APMC, CMS, GISP (keith@isd ltd.com) is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and has an Advanced Project Management Certification (APMC) with 17 years of GIS and IT project management experience. In addition to several technical certifications, Keith holds a Master of Arts in Geography and a MBA. He is the president of Innovative Systems Design Limited (www.isd ltd.com). ISD is an enterprise technology management consulting firm specializing in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), Enterprise Content Management (ECM) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) strategic planning, acquisition and implementation.



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