

MST512: Project Management
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ENABLING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN PROJECTS

According to Kezsbom & Edward (2001), "Communication is the single largest factor determining the quality, efficiency, satisfaction, and productivity of a project team." Yet, poor communication continues to be a major contributing factor to failed projects. How do project managers with seemingly strong interpersonal, face-to-face, communication skills still fail when it comes to managing project communications? For instance, a project manager communicates clear deliverables in team meetings, but neglects timely communication to senior management the need to hire a contractor for a specific task, ultimately causing the project to miss its scheduled deadline. For project managers to successfully fulfill their roles at enabling effective communication, they must first understand the fundamentals of communications in the project environment by examining the following:

1. Communications process
2. Methods of communication
3. Communications planning
4. Barriers to effective communication
5. Project communications lifecycle
6. Project manager's role

COMMUNICATIONS PROCESS

As George Bernard Shaw said, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." Communication involves both sending and receiving a message; effective communication results only when the **message received is understood as the sender intended**. For projects to be successful, constant, effective communication among everyone involved is required (Verzuh, 2004). According to Dobie (2007), a successful **project communications process requires the following framework:**

- team knowledge of the organizational structure, roles, and responsibilities
- team knowledge of how the project relates to the organization's mission and strategy
- an environment of trust, loyalty, and commitment
- continuous communication feedback

The Project Management Institute's (PMI) 2004 publication of *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, demonstrates the **key components of project communications** in a basic model of communication; they include:

- Encode. To translate thoughts or ideas into a language that is understood by others.
- Message. The output of encoding.
- Medium. The method used to convey the message.
- Noise. Anything that interferes with the transmission and understanding of the message (e.g., different communication styles, distance).

- Decode. To translate the message back into meaningful thoughts or ideas.

The following is a diagram showing the Basic Model of Communication (PMI, 2004).

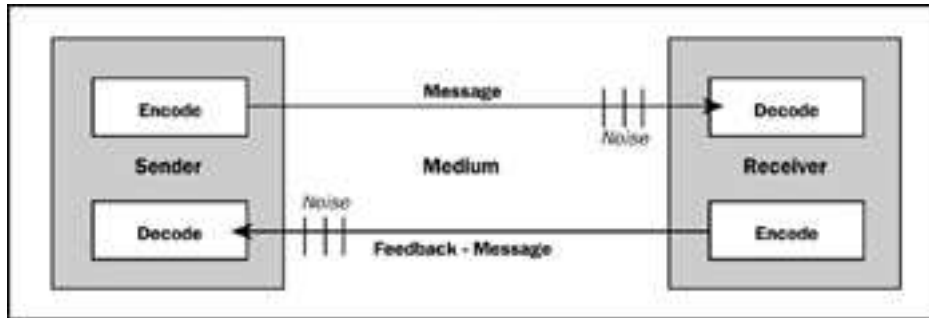


Figure 10-3: Communication—Basic Model from PMI, 2004

The key components of this model appear intuitive, but as will be seen later, they should be thoughtfully considered when sending or receiving a message; at any point, there can be a breakdown in communication, negatively impacting the project.

Another aspect of project communications is that it is **multi-directional**; information is communicated in various directions within the organization, for example, downward from senior management to the project manager, upward to senior management from the project manager, or laterally among team members. Project communications are more likely to be successful when there is already a **constructive communications framework in place within the organization** (Kliem, 2004). For example, if the organization already suffers because senior management is disrespectful to mid-level management, the project communications process will also suffer because of it.

Within the project communications process there are several areas of focus. According to PMI (2004), they are:

- Communications Planning. Determine the information and communications needs of **the project stakeholders**.
- Information Distribution. Make needed information available to project stakeholders in a **timely manner**.
- Performance Reporting. Collect and **distribute performance information**, including status reports, progress measures, and forecasts.
- Managing Stakeholders. Manage communications to satisfy the requirements of and **resolve issues** with project stakeholders.

The following is a diagram showing the flow of the Project Communications

Management Process (PMI, 2004).

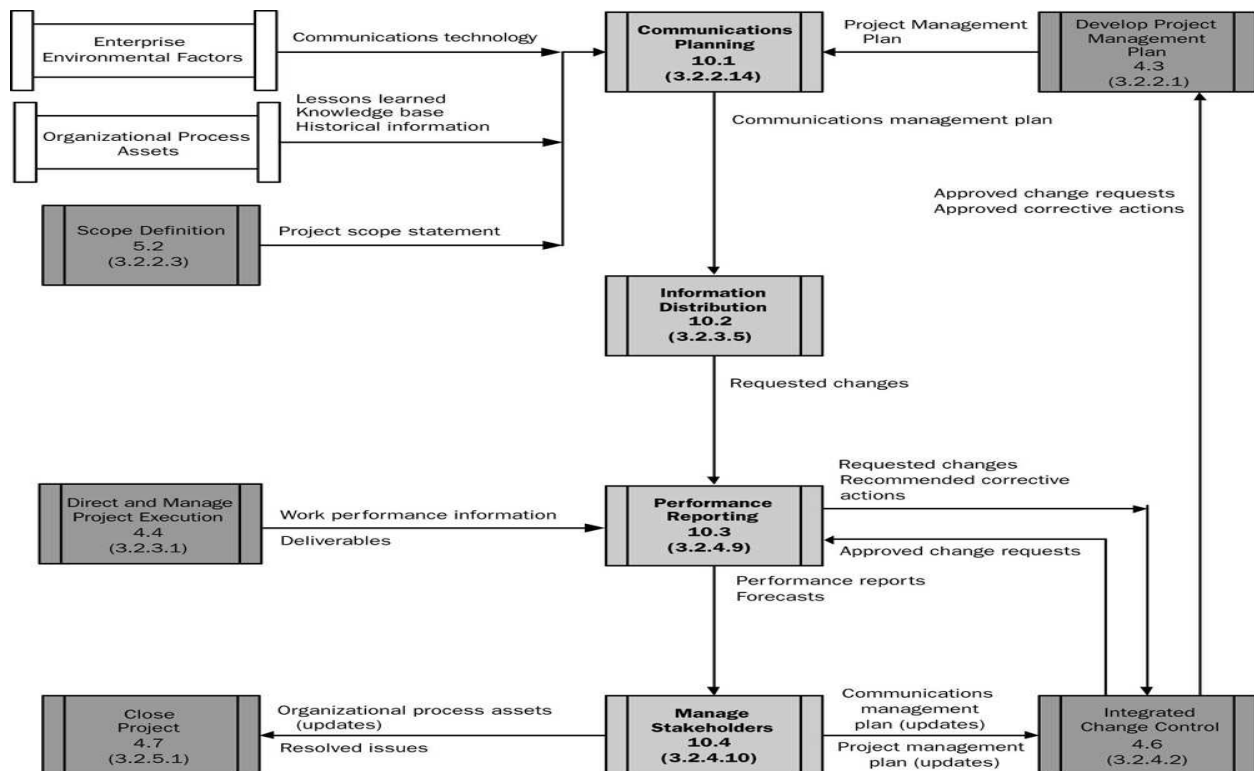


Figure 10-2. Project Communications Management Process Flow Diagram from PMI,

2004

The requirements for each process area can be scaled according to the size of the project; the larger the project, the more information and communication necessary.

METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

As expected, within the project communications process, communication occurs in different forms, such as **verbal, written, and non-verbal**. Kezsbom & Edward (2001) describe the practical usage of the methods as follows:

- Verbal communication - our ability to talk, communicate ideas and emotions through common spoken words. It is used to **transmit information, explanations, and instructions on short notice or in situations that are highly interactive.**
- Nonverbal communication - encoding a message without using words. It includes gestures, vocal tones, facial expressions, and body language. **Nonverbal factors tend to have more influence** on the impact of a message than verbal factors. As noted by Luckey and Phillips (2006), this dynamic is expressed in a formula developed by Albert Mehrabian:
Total Message Impact = Words (7%) + **Vocal tones (38%) + Facial expressions (55%)**
- Written communication – creating reports, plans, proposals, and other forms of information to be transmitted. The **message must be well-planned, simple, and direct to be clearly understood when read quickly.**

Each method is required within the project environment; neglecting the significance of one will impair the communication throughout project.

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

Simply understanding the communications process and different methods of communicating is not enough. To increase the probability of a project's success, a strong communications plan must be developed. Verzuh (2004) proposes that "A project communication plan is the **written strategy for getting the right information to the right project stakeholders at the right time**" (p. 62). To effectively communicate with stakeholders, Verzuh recommends determining:

- Who needs information, why, and when? This includes the sponsor, functional management, customers, and project team.
- What category of information is needed and in what detail? For example, authorization, status change, or coordination.
- What is the goal to be communicated to the audience and what medium will best accomplish it?

For a communications plan to be effective, Verzuh also emphasizes the importance of the following practices:

- Establishing clear team communication. Team meetings, voicemail, and email are the chief means used to meet the team's four core communication needs:
 1. **Assigned responsibility** for different elements of the project.
 2. **Coordinated information** to enable members to work together proficiently.

3. **Status information** to track progress, identify issues and take corrective action.
 4. **Authorization information** to keep project decisions synchronized; members are notified of all decisions relating to the project and business environment.
- Providing timely information. To be used effectively, information must be **delivered to its target in a timely manner.**
 - Proactively managing change. An **escalation procedure** should be established for prompt communication with upper management when a project begins to run over cost or schedule, or if decisions need to be made quickly in response to changes.
 - Performing close-out reporting. Final acceptance of the close-out deliverables by the stakeholders **confirms project completion.** Also, creating a record of **lessons learned** provides opportunities for improvement.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

When developing the communications plan, project managers must remember to **anticipate challenges and incorporate solutions.** Given the complexity of the communications process, difficulties will arise in the project environment. Several factors strain project communications, including information overload, compressed schedules, decentralized decision making, multiple reporting relationships, and distance-spanning "virtual" teams (Kezsbom & Edward, 2001).

One of the biggest struggles is managing a virtual team. A virtual team is similar to a conventional team in that members share a common purpose. However, the virtual team is more problematic because project members are separated by distance, time, and organizational boundaries (Duarte & Snyder, 2006). Coupled with the various components of the basic communication model mentioned earlier, **virtual teams are particularly vulnerable to failure**. Consider what it takes for Korean project team members to successfully communicate with fellow teammates in the United States. They most likely need to encode the message in English, send it using one of several technology tools (e.g., audio conference), the receiver then needs to accurately decode the message. Noise, such language obstacles or lack of nonverbal communication cues, can compromise the original meaning of the message. Taking time to follow up and verify that the message has been understood as intended will go a long way in preventing costly complications further along in the project.

Really, for a virtual team to have a chance at being successful, **organizational leadership must have a culture that values communication** (Duarte & Snyder, 2006). If there is already a strong communication culture established, management will be more likely to support project managers in their efforts to address any project communication issues that may arise. O'Hara-Deveraux and Johansen (1994) add that an environment of trust is of utmost importance for the virtual team environment; **trust** will help prevent the physical distance between team members from becoming a psychological distance as well.

A facet to consider when developing trust within a virtual team is that of different cultures. For example, Chinese businessmen tend to be subtle and indirect in their communication, while westerners are often viewed as aggressive. In order to avoid conflict, Chinese prefer not to say “no”; instead, they may hint indirectly at “no” during the conversation. It is actually common to hear the Chinese say “yes” in order to avoid conflict. To build trust, it is wise to respectfully verify what has been said and agreed to in a manner that all parties preserve their dignity (Graham & Lam, 2003).

As with conventional teams, the start up is the greatest opportunity to begin building an effective virtual team. As Noble (2004) suggests with thoroughbred horse races, the difference between failure and success is usually determined by how they come “out of the chute.” Similar to Dobie’s project communications framework mentioned earlier, Noble (2004) recommends several **approaches for building a strong foundation** for project teams and suggests virtual teams be especially proactive, deliberate, explicit, and disciplined in addressing the following areas:

- Establishing a well understood purpose (mission, goals, tasks, results)
- Clarifying stakeholder expectations
- Understanding team membership
- Clear and complimentary of roles and responsibilities
- Building rapport and relationships
- Instituting communication practices and protocols

PROJECT COMMUNICATIONS LIFECYCLE

While a strong start is crucial, projects will require effective communication throughout each phase of the project; each phase brings its own communications **management requirements** (Dobie, 2007):

- Initiation phase. Establish the **communications requirements to be translated into a detailed communications plan**. Identify stakeholder communications requirements. Other aspects of the project, such as scoping and schedule, will be ineffective if they are not effectively communicated.
- Planning phase. **Develop the communications plan**. Be specific, for example, determine how often project status meetings will be held.
- Delivery phase. **Continue to manage the communications system** by staying active in the information flow both in the internal and external environments (e.g., stakeholders, reports, meetings).
- Finalization phase. Perform a **project communications review** and determine **lessons for improvement**. This phase may require handing over to operations the communications structure surrounding the project solution itself, or the project communications system to operations for post-project reporting of operational effectiveness (for instance, are the metrics established for the project actually being met?)

The following is a diagram illustrating the communications planning requirements in each phase (Dobie, 2007).

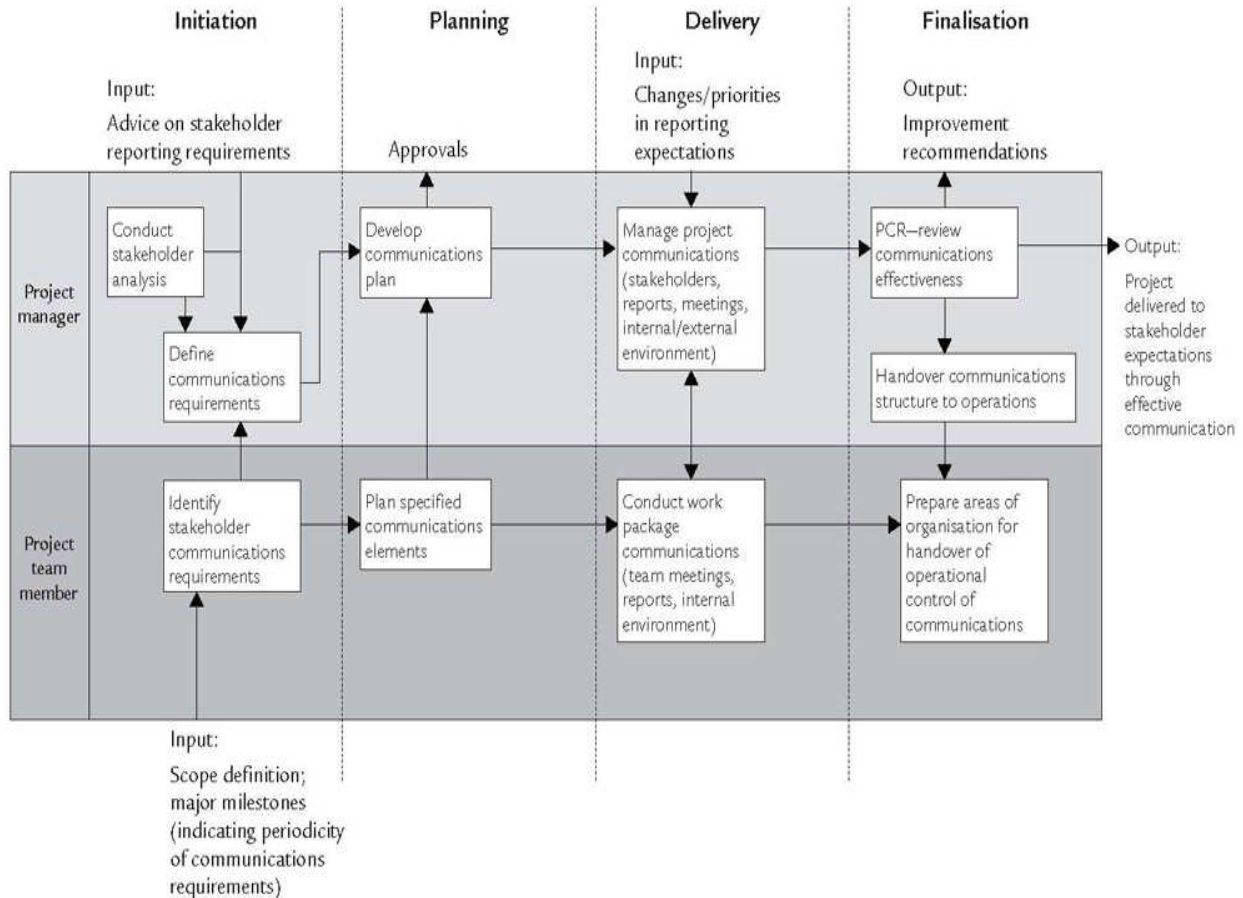


Figure 10.1: Project communications management from Dobie, 2007

PROJECT MANAGER’S ROLE IN ENABLING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Clearly, there is a great deal of knowledge and planning involved in project communications. According to Kezsbom & Edward (2001), “The extent to which project managers can effectively obtain, update, and disseminate accurate information will affect team coordination, integration, and performance.” Project managers must have the ability to **think logically and invest time in communications planning.**

Another observation is that while project managers spend the majority of their time communicating, and serve as communication liaisons, they need to ensure **ALL team members understand how communication affects the project** (PMI,

2004). Project managers should establish communication and project stakeholder expectations early by holding an **initial face-to-face meeting**; this will begin cultivating the trusting environment critical to the team's success (Noble, 2004). A **foundation of trust** is a key element in project teams because projects rely on participation. If the team members are uncomfortable with others on the team, they will not feel free to express their opinions (Kezsbom & Edward, 2001).

Finally, for project managers to enable effective communication, they must understand the fundamentals of communications within the project environment; they should be proactive and practice these fundamentals appropriately and consistently. This will take time, effort, the willingness to learn, and the ability to apply that learning. Ultimately, it will be worth it, because a project manager's capacity to integrate these concepts will determine if the team experiences failure, or success.

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