

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

Fostering Project Communication – is about planning, process and people!

By Suresh Malladi

People and their expectations create the larger environment in which projects are executed. Communication can make or break projects. Project Managers have enormous responsibility in building solid communication models that aid as an instrument for clear, concise and timely information to cater to the goals, the expectations, the tasks, the reviews & feedback and the required mentoring during the project cycle to foster success and transparency in the project. If so, communication can be a strategic tool not only for project and external communication but also for internal communication and improvement.

Project management and project communication are becoming more complex as multi-location project execution is coming into the picture. The challenge multiplies if it involves working with vendors. Having vendors globally can make it even more complex. A robust communication model should be in place to handle communication for in-house projects or geographically dispersed in-house projects or vendor executed projects. The goal of the communication model should be

- To provide precise and concise project communication
- To involve all necessary stakeholders and maintain regular contact to keep transparency in all transactions
- To have clear communication channels with well-defined roles and responsibilities
- To facilitate review and feedback of the project deliveries and project performance internally and externally
- To clarify doubts, overcome challenges and avert risks that affect the project
- To build the trust and relationship between the parties
- To train, motivate and mentor the project teams

The purpose of this article is to provide inputs on what the Project Managers should figure into their communication models beyond a mere reporting of the project progress. The following sections cover some of the points a project manager should keep in mind while devising the communication strategy.

A good communication model starts from the beginning

Managers should realize that communication transcends the entire project life cycle. A communication model should be developed early into the project, should be bought in and the plan should keep stakeholders informed and engaged at well-defined intervals. The communication plan should be built based on the requirements of the project and its execution. Managers can avail of the historical information, guidelines, templates etc and tailor them to the requirements of the current project. All necessary roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined on who should communicate what, when, how and where. Appropriate channels of escalation should be defined. Periodicity of information should be determined by considering the requirements of all the project stakeholders. Project Managers should identify the components of communications models, nodes of communication, build and revise communication plans, recognize where the communication model is breaking down, recognize the need for different communication styles of the stakeholders and periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the communication plan. Flexibility should be built into the communication plan to meet the changing requirements of the project.

Identify all stakeholders and clearly communicate the expectations

Project Managers should identify all the stakeholders and their communication needs. Different stakeholders will be involved at different stages of the project and their expectations, requirements and needs vary. A project manager should emphasize involving all the stakeholders to avail of their experience and expertise. Structured mechanisms should be in place to know, prioritize and deliver the project requirements according to the expectations of the stakeholders. It should also be made clear what will be delivered in the project and why something will not be delivered.

The Project Managers should also clearly communicate what is expected of the stakeholders, their time and timing at which they are needed and what they will receive in return. When working on outsourced projects, the Project Managers of the client and the vendor should determine the lines of communication, the roles and responsibilities; who will communicate with whom, what will be delivered. In geographically dispersed projects, the larger environment that accounts for linguistic and cultural differences should be kept in mind to ensure that information is communicated, processed, interpreted and absorbed in an expected manner. If you are vendor project manager, you should know whom to work with on the client side. If you are a client's project manager, you should assign a clear line of command on who will communicate with the vendor, who will pass on the inputs, feedback, review results etc. You should also establish a clear line of communication on how the vendor delivered information and deliverables will be evaluated and absorbed back into the client organization.

Outsourcing poses a chance for internal resistance and a clear communication plan should be drafted and should be bought in by the Senior Management on how the internal organizational fears will be allayed, how the employees will be motivated, how they should work with the client's point of contact and vendor's point of contact etc.

Have strong process orientation

Project communication handles the delivery and review of a set of project artifacts. These include the project deliverables as well as the project communication artifacts like reports, forecasts, feedback etc. Strong processes should be in place to capture this information for future usage. Project Managers should determine the delivery and documentation that is needed for successful communication. Templates and guidelines can be useful in this regard.

When working with vendors, templates that can be mutually understood should be negotiated including the format, content, and mode of delivery and frequency of delivery. Conducting review sessions and capturing the lessons learned should be done at the end of phases/projects. No project is complete without conducting the final project reviews/audits and all the lessons learned should be captured into the organizational project repositories.

All the project artifacts and documentation should also be collected in the organizational process assets for future reference. The positive recordings will turn into best practices and the negative outcomes can serve as action items for improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency. The phase-end or final reviews should also review what has been done well and what could have been done well. When working with vendors, both the client and the vendor teams should review within and with each other at designated intervals about the project progress and lessons learned. Communication should continue to track the remedies suggested during such meetings and how they are being implemented.

Standard Operating Procedure which lists the assumptions which are commonly understood should be in place to avert misinterpretation. Both the parties should understand the jargon as it helps comprehend the manner of decision making. The vendor and the client should also provide an overview of the internal culture rather than merely conveying what will be executed. Exposing the internal culture will help both the parties understand the larger context in which the project will be executed and the mutual understanding will help spawn a relationship

between both the parties. One common error is that once the communication practices are often identified, they are seldom incorporated into IT governance procedures. These guidelines should be discussed internally within the organization to make all the stakeholders an integral part of the project, program and portfolio management process. All the project stakeholders should be adequately educated in these important skills.

Consistency in communication will be more if the team subscribes to predefined formats and operational templates. Standards should be established for format, language, and nomenclature for project management processes and technical components. Communication becomes more challenging when involving virtual teams. Specific guidelines for communication and the tools to use should be clearly identified as group dynamics play a role in asynchronous communication involving virtual teams.

The team should be given the opportunity to draft protocols as to when each tool should be used. Each team member should participate actively in team meetings in whatever format, taking responsibility for being heard and being understood. Agreed-upon methods to stay in contact with team members throughout the project life cycle also are useful and can then serve as starting points to discuss ideas, issues, insights, and information. A communications schedule, as detailed in the communications management plan, should be established that is flexible and can be adjusted if required to changing conditions. More frequent communication may need to be allowed so that team members continue to feel connected.

Attention to feelings, priorities, and perceptions, however, is equally important and becomes more challenging in the virtual environment in conveying information. Communication processes and procedures may need modification to assure cohesiveness and commitment of team members. Sufficient lead time and a specific agenda are required for full participation in the meetings. Methods are needed to check for understanding. The plan should also specify who will speak and what will be the time limits to speak or to respond to ideas or to make suggestions. Contingency and follow-up measures should be in place on how to handle when variables like technology or unanimity fails in the virtual meetings.

Promote openness and transparency

Progress of the project should be reported in a timely manner with precise information. Providing honest information, even if it is negative will help take timely remedial action to correct the course of the project. Project Managers should use the appropriate tools and techniques to track the vital signs about the project against their variance thresholds. Once the variance is identified, the Project Managers should communicate it to all the stakeholders to not only inform the status but also to see if they can provide their expertise in correcting such variances. The monitoring of the variance and the corrective actions should also be notified to all the stakeholders.

Such honest reporting will not only help timely action but also help breed trust and responsibility among the stakeholders. Project Managers should also involve the team members during phases like design finalization, project reviews, project acceptance etc. as this will make them feel important and own the responsibility for the project. Involving team members during requirements elicitation and design finalization will also help get more ideas about how to fulfill the prospective requirements by an optimal solution design. Open communication must be encouraged so that every team member feels comfortable contributing to discussions and debates.

Debates and discussions should be managed properly to be a useful forum for providing information and ideas and ways to best share information among the team. The communication policies should provide an environment that assures that the information shared is valuable to the project.

Have greater responsibility towards people and beyond

Project Managers need to realize that they have a role towards the project teams. Project Managers should realize the training and education needs of the team members and should arrange for fulfilling them. Projects can have negative effects on the organization and the Project Managers should have plans to minimize the negatives and leverage the positives. During outsourcing, the organizational stakeholders will have their insecurities and fears which can adversely impact the performance.

Project Managers should explain how the outsourced development can be beneficial to the ongoing work and what role each in-house employee will play to contribute to the exercise. This will allow the in-house employees to know not only that they are safe but also on how to work in the new scenario to absorb the knowledge back into their ongoing work when the vendor does the knowledge transfer and project transition. Project Managers should also realize that they have an enormous responsibility in motivating the employees.

One area the Project Managers ignore when the phases or projects come to an end is to sit with the employees to provide them the feedback on their performance during the project. Having peer reviews or 360-degree reviews can also help in suggesting more inputs to the employees. Project Managers should take this up on a periodic basis to not only mentor the employees but also to identify their areas of improvement and help them with plans to improve. Honest feedback and mentoring will help nurture individuals and have a healthy relationship with them. Project Managers also have a greater responsibility towards the profession of project management. Project Managers can speak or write about their project experiences and can share their successes and failures with the project management community. This helps them share what worked and what did not.

Conclusion

In summary, project communication is becoming complex by the day due to the numerous stakeholders involved and their baggage of ideas, views, perceptions and standpoints. A solid communication model backed up by processes should be in place to account for the requirements of the various stakeholders. Project Managers should realize that the motive is to include all necessary information and people and the motto is to provide honest and timely communication about the project. Having process and people orientation is important to make communication effective.



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