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What happened to Business Communications
in Project Management?

By Rebecca A. Winston, JD

After commencing a new position and observing the communication style of most of the project managers and program managers under my guidance, I became curious about what has happened to our business communications style protocols. It would appear that we have been not only a society of the casual dress, but the casual business address. Unfortunately, this approach has led to numerous other ills in our business communications as I have observed.

First, what do I mean by the casual business address. What I mean is that we no longer address our letters or our memos to Mr. X, Ms. X, or Dr. X, instead we address them to Bill or Sue. I do not have a problem with having a solid relationship with one's customer and either crossing out the formal address and placing the name if you truly know them on a personal basis or putting the name in parentheses if they prefer the informal address, but one is still engaged in a business communication.

So why is this seemingly minor point of what is viewed as archaic formality so important? For several reasons, one very important reason is that one takes the time and care to make sure the document one is transmitting to Ms. X is correct as to budget and schedule information and is grammatically correct. One does not seem to have the same compunction regarding a letter or memo to Sue because after all it is just Sue and one knows her so well. No matter how well one knows Ms. X, Sue, she is still and foremost for the purpose of this communication the customer. This statement leads to the next point which is that as the customer Ms. X, Sue, is due all the respect and acknowledgement that that position deserves. Ms. X is after paying for the project or representing those individuals or entities that are paying for the project.

What if Mr. X was a stakeholder? Does a stakeholder deserve less respect or less acknowledgement of position? After all a stakeholder can often change the fate of the project, would one want to not afford such a person respect and acknowledge that positional influence? Would one not want to take the care and time to ensure that all of the facts, figures, and data provided are correct? The answer is that one would. Therefore, the business communication should reflect all of the foregoing by addressing the party with a respectful business address.

Issues arise from the informality that goes beyond just the errors that can creep into the communication at hand. The one or two letters or memos give rise to a sentiment with the customer or stakeholder that the party communicating is unreliable when it comes to transmitted data. No communication is to be trusted. This trust issue extends to proposals, change controls, risk registers, and just about any project communication whether it is written or oral. When this trust is lost where does it leave the project or program manager? Where does it leave one's company?

Habits are hard to break. Being so casual is a habit. It will be hard to break. But break it one must. One must take business seriously. In economic times such as the ones we are facing, one must take each and every relationship seriously. Each relationship is to be valued. Once one has lost trust it is almost impossible to redeem. No amount of stating that it was just an error will correct the situation. If it were just one error in a respectful, business relationship one might recover, but in a casual relationship where one mistakenly views it a relationship of equals, recovery is hard to win back.

Jeans might be fine for Fridays in the office, but remember the customer and stakeholder control the project's destiny to a large extent. While as a project manager or program manager, one may have a hand on the wheel of the ship to guide it—the weather and the owners of the ship can make or break one voyage.

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Rebecca (Becky) Winston, Esq., JD, PMI Fellow, is a former Chair of the Board of Directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®). An experienced expert on the subject of project management (PM) in the fields of research & development (R&D), energy, environmental restoration and national security, she is well known throughout the United States and globally as a leader in the PM professional world. Becky has over 25 years of experience in program and project management, primarily on programs funded by the US government. She is a graduate of the University of Nebraska's College of Law, Juris Doctorate (1980), in Lincoln, Nebraska and has a Bachelor's of Science (BS) degree in Education from Nebraska Wesleyan University in the USA. Active in PMI since 1993, Rebecca Winston helped pioneer PMI's Specific Interest Groups (SIGs) in the nineties, including the Project Earth and Government SIGs, and was a founder and first co-chair of the Women in Project Management SIG. She served two terms on the PMI board of directors and was elected a PMI Fellow in 2005. She is a licensed attorney and a member of the American Bar Association and the Association of Female Executives in the USA. She has extensive recent PM experience in the areas of national defense and security, and has worked closely with local, regional and national officials, including federal agencies, the US Congress and the Pentagon. Becky is currently Chair of the US Technical Advisory Group for the new ISO Standard for Project Management, currently under development. She also serves as a Global Advisor to PMForum and is a PM Ambassador™, available for international speaking engagements. She lives in Idaho Falls, Idaho, USA.