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# The Project Manager's Communication Toolkit

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Authored by: Jha (2010)



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# The Project Manager's Communication Toolkit (adapted for learning purposes)

## Overview

There is an old adage: “It is not what you say, but how you say it.” A fact can be communicated in several ways; however, good communication not only resolves conflicts and solves problems, but also makes an ordinary work effort look extraordinary, bringing out the best returns to the presenter.

According to Peter Drucker, the ability to communicate well is essential for success and is perhaps the most important of all the skills an individual should possess. Tom Peter says that “Communication is everyone’s panacea for everything.” A high percentage of the friction, frustrations, and inefficiencies in working relationships are traceable to poor communication. There is no denying the fact that good communication is an essential skill for the success of a management professional in any business, and it is even more important in a project environment. However, communication needs are very different in a project compared to any other business environment and so, apart from the general communication tools, it also requires the familiarity and mastery of a specific set of tools suited for the specific need. Projects are becoming more and more complex because of the changing business circumstances, such as multivendor organizations, matrix organizations, multicultural workforces, offshore–onsite models, global delivery models, remote locations, etc. With growing global competition, there is more pressure on organizations to finish projects on time and within budget. This leads to higher expectations from stakeholders and therefore creates more chances of conflicts. Thus, communication challenges are growing day by day.

Projects mostly fail because of communication breakdown. Project managers play the role of communication coordinator and thus they are responsible for both the success and failure of communication inside the project. In general, project managers (PMs) spend 90 percent of their time in communication. No wonder why communication skill is the single most desirable skill of a PM. PMs can face challenges from all quarters—high expectations from senior management, unrealistic deadlines, scope creep, resource competition, unknown risks, uncertain dependencies, insufficient team skill, lack of accountability from key team members, conflicting

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interests among stakeholders, internal politics, and weak organizational processes and methodologies—just to name a few. Often these challenges show up in groups and can drive any normal PM crazy. But the PMs can successfully handle these situations with the help of good communication skills. Just as soldiers must possess the weapons and equipment to fight under different circumstances and must master the art and science of those weapons, so too a project manager must be aware of the right kinds of tools and techniques to fight the all-important communication battle.

Let us understand some basic concepts of communication in general and how it is defined and conceptualized specific to projects.

### **Communication Concepts**

Communication is as old as human beings. It is perhaps older than civilization and it is older than the oldest language ever existed on earth. Communication is part and parcel of every living entity's life. We perform some kind of communication all the time, but yet communication skill is elusive to most people. Human beings invented, cultured, and nurtured so many different languages, dialects, grammars, scripts, signals, mediums, channels, tools, and technologies to make communication better, easier, simpler, and more convenient. Ironically, it has become more and more complex. In the modern world, communication, along with its numerous branches and subbranches, has become a vast area of research. With advancing technologies, changing social patterns, increasing global human interactions, and rising business competition, new aspects are constantly being added to communication. Readers must have come across terms such as “linguistic communication,” “paralinguistic communication,” “interpersonal communication,” “anomalous communication,” “psychic communication,” “auditory communication, verbal communication, nonverbal communication, written communication,” “mass communication,” “telecommunication,” etc. The list goes on and on—it is mind boggling.

Over time, many scholars, scientists, social scientists, and psychologists have attempted to define communication from different angles and different perspectives. But in its simplest form it can be defined through a sender–receiver model (see [Figure 1.1](#)). In this model, a sender transfers a message containing information to a receiver. This is the activity of conveying

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information. More elaborately, it can be defined as the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signal, writing, or behavior.

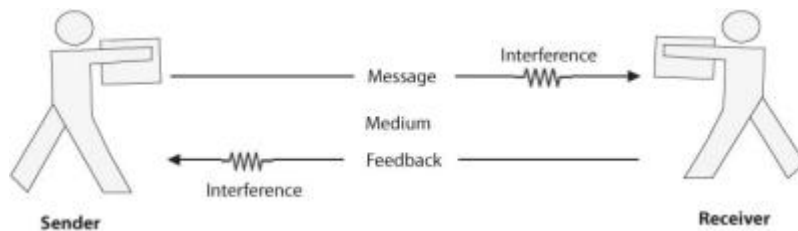


Figure 1.1: **Sender–receiver model.**

### **Types of Project Communications**

1. *Interpersonal communication:* This is a very important and necessary skill for the project manager and includes listening, self-presentation, problem solving, decision making, negotiating, and conflict management. The goals of interpersonal communications include:
  - Understanding the exact meaning and intent of others
  - Being understood by others
  - Gaining acceptance for yourself and your ideas
  - Producing action and change
2. *Communication with public and community:* Includes all public relationship efforts necessary to encourage community involvement, enhance public understanding of the project, break down resistance, gain acceptance, and perform the role of the spokesperson for the project.
3. *Formal communication:* This is mostly done through written communication and includes plans, reports, memos, letters, forms, guidelines, etc.
4. *Informal communication:* This kind of communication is generally done through face-to-face or other verbal channels and is dependent on common interests, hobbies, kinship, social status, social background, etc.

One should not confuse communication skills with project management communications. Communication skill and the art of communication are broader in scope than project management communications. The art of communications includes the following:

- Sender–receiver model.



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- Choice of media: When to communicate in writing versus orally, when to write an informal memo versus a formal report, when to communicate face to face versus email. The media chosen for communication activities will depend on the situation.
  - Writing style: Active versus passive voice, sentence structure, and word choice.
  - Presentation techniques: Body language and design of visual aids.
  - Meeting management techniques: Preparing an agenda and dealing with conflict.

Following are some key terms involved in the sender–receiver model, and their definition. This will help readers understand the communication model better.

- *Sender*: The originator of the message; the source of communication, also known as communicator.
- *Receiver*: The person for whom the message is intended.
- *Message*: Data that is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver.
- *Channel*: The medium by which the information is transmitted; for example, paper or electronic communication. There is a very nice quotation on communication medium by Simone Weil that sums up the important role of medium in any communication. (<http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/topicquote/communication> [July 10, 2008]).

“Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but is also their means of communication. Every separation is a link.”

- *Encode*: To translate thoughts and ideas into a language that is understood by others.
- *Decode*: To translate message back into the meaningful thoughts.
- *Noise*: Any interference or disturbance that confuses the message (e.g., distance).
- *Communication barrier*: Obstacles that impede communications (e.g., limited communication channels, distance, noise, cultural differences, organizational climate, perceptions, limited information, withholding of information, terminology, hidden agenda, etc.).
- *Filtering*: Occurs when a large portion of the message is lost between the sender and the receiver. It is generally caused by language problems, cultural differences, semantics, lack of knowledge base, etc.

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The components of the sender–receiver model (Figure 1.1) must be taken into account when dealing with interpersonal communications during project communications. There are many challenges in using these components to effectively communicate with project stakeholders. To ensure that messages are received and understood, two-way communication is necessary. The sender determines what information to share and with whom to share it. Next, the sender encodes the message before transmitting through the medium to the receiver as a signal. The receiver receives the message, decodes to understand its meaning, and then responds accordingly. Communication is successful if the decoded message is the same as the sender intended it. Using experience, the sender anticipates how the message will be decoded and encodes the message accordingly. Both the sender and receiver have a duty to understand and to be understood. This is accomplished through feedback and acknowledgment.

The PM should have an understanding of the barriers to successful communication. Examples of some common communication barriers include information overload, lack of subject knowledge, cultural differences, organizational environment, preoccupied notion, and large number of communication links. It is very important to understand the effect of the number of links in any communication. The following formula is widely used to calculate the number of links in the communication:

$$\text{Number of links} = n(n - 1)/2$$

where  $n$  is the number of people involved in communication.

For example, if you are communicating with just one person, then the number of people involved is two. Using the above formula, the number of links in this case will be one only. If you are communicating with two other people, then the number of links will be three. If you have a total of five people involved, then the number of links becomes ten. Similarly, if you have ten people in the loop, then the number of links suddenly rises to forty-five. Therefore, if you plan to send a communication to ten people, then expect the message to be repeated at least forty-five times. The communication link grows in a nonlinear fashion as you add more participants. The repetition of the communication has a huge negative impact on the project, especially if the original message was not clear and to the point. Imagine the impact of any mistake in communication where many people are involved. So, plan all the messages properly



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in terms of their recipients and always think twice before adding extra participants to any communication.

There are three forms of communication: verbal, nonverbal, and written. Nonverbal communication includes gestures, vocal tones, facial expression, environmental settings, manner of dress, and body language. In general, nonverbal factors have more influence on the total impact of the message than do verbal factors. According to Albert Mehrabian, words account for only 7 percent, whereas vocal tone contributes 38 percent and facial expression contributes 55 percent in a face-to-face communication ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert\\_Mehrabian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mehrabian) [June 30, 2008]). The PM is the leader of the project, so he/she must be very careful with the nonverbal form of the communication so that he/she sends out clear and unambiguous messages. To be effective, mean what you say and say what you mean. This is called *walking the talk*. In the context of a project, written communication includes plans, reports, guidelines, procedures, messages, presentations, and other forms of information distribution to the stakeholders. The corresponding tools form the basis of the PM's communication.

Communication planning and execution can be difficult, especially if you are new to the organization and you do not know the stakeholders and their expectations well. Initial days are very critical in building relationships and rapport with different customers and the clients. If the expectations are not understood and the communication is not planned properly, then the project managers often struggle to communicate the project information effectively. They either send too many reports or produce status reports that make little sense to most of the stakeholders. They generate too few reports and do not provide a complete and satisfactory picture of the project. However, they can get better over time if they seriously observe the pattern, feedback, and comments from the key stakeholders. Understand the risk tolerance level of the key stakeholders and the customers. Customers with a high risk tolerance level are easy to deal with, and they require less reports and updates compared to those who have medium and low levels of risk tolerance. People with high risk tolerance levels are more positive and are usually more optimistic. Stakeholders with a low risk tolerance level will try to avert any risk, will ask too many questions, will indulge in micromanagement, and then you will be required to

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have more and frequent communication with such customers. Communication problems occur throughout the life of the project; planning makes life easy. These problems have a huge impact on the project. It is essential to plan for the communication so that communication-related problems can be approached proactively and the project manager is prepared for any situation. Most project managers either knowingly ignore or struggle in this discipline. Sometimes they are oblivious to this important aspect of project management. There can be many reasons for this, including:

1. Weak organizational process often leads to this problem. People generally tend to follow the processes of the organization and they ignore anything that they are not formally required to do. So, if formal communication planning is not part of the organizational process, then project managers overlook this important aspect of their job.
2. Project managers take this task for granted and do not allocate enough time for the task. They consider other planning tasks as more important and get busy with them, and later they never find time to return to this important task. Sometimes they ignore planning for this task due to overconfidence. They think that they have been dealing with most of the people and stakeholders from the past assignments and thus they do not require mapping out a formal plan. But that is foolhardy and frequently leads to failure.
3. Lack of training and knowledge to carry out this task properly. They lack the skill and experience to initiate and carry out this task. Most project managers do not understand how to proceed with communication planning and so they hesitate doing so.

Details of the project communication tools are provided in the following chapters. Some common best practices are listed below; in general they should be performed by the project managers to prevent most communication problems.

1. Solicit inputs, prepare the project status report, and distribute it on a scheduled day and time. In general, the status report is distributed on either Friday or Monday. This establishes a rhythm and creates confidence among the stakeholders.
2. Hold weekly meeting with the key stakeholders of the project. This is very important because many times you will observe that your effort of producing the status report goes to waste because people are not reading the report. You may end up sending the same information multiple times to different people. This situation can be avoided if everybody goes through the

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report at once and asks all the questions for you to answer once. The process will ensure that everyone is on the same page and you can save valuable time for yourself. Sometimes, an important point can go unnoticed unless you discuss it directly with the stakeholders.

3. Hold a weekly project status meeting with all project team members. Also invite the functional managers. This is a very important tool for project communication. Some team members may argue that they only speak for two minutes but they have to spend an entire hour in the meeting, so it is a waste of their time. But one should realize that the project is a coordinated effort and everyone should be aware of the “big picture” and what is going on in the project. Others’ work or a decision about others’ work may have an impact on that particular team member’s work; and if the status and issues are discussed separately, then synergy cannot be achieved. Apart from this, there can be so many generic communications and other project agendas to be discussed as a group. Team meetings enhance the sense of belonging and strengthen teamwork.
4. Send out the meeting agenda at least a couple of hours before the meeting. At the same time, the gap between the agenda distribution and the meeting should not be more than a day.
5. Send minutes of the meeting preferably the same day; if not possible, then the following day. A delay in sending minutes might cause a delay in the intensity and in the activities related to action items.
6. Hold a daily checkpoint meeting when the project is in the Quality Testing phase. This is the point when the project is close to implementation. It is very important to keep track of all the defects and issues, and then follow up every day so that defect-fix turnaround can be quicker and the intensity can be maintained.
7. Hold meetings twice a week with subject matter experts and team leads when the project is in the Analysis phase.
8. Communicate project schedule to the entire team on a regular basis and keep reminding them of the upcoming milestones. The schedule should be updated at least on a weekly basis, indicating percent completion, changes in any dates, addition or removal of tasks, etc.
9. In most cases, you may not own the project human resources. In matrix organizations, the human resources report to their functional managers and so you may not have any direct reports. When a resource issue arises, try to work with the respective functional manager and always keep the manager in the loop for major decisions impacting their resources. If the

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deliverables are not completed on time or if you have behavioral issues with any resource or any other resource conflict, resolve these issues with the help of the resource manager. It is your duty to raise the issue in a timely manner so that the resource manager can take corrective action.