MANAGING COMMUNICATION | LECTURE

MANAGING COMMUNICATION

o A proper management of communications in a project ensures that information flows in a timely manner and reaches the appropriate stakeholders.

o The types of information that are exchanged in a project include:
   o Technical information
   o Project status information
   o Project decisions
   o Project action items
   o Project advertisement

MANAGING COMMUNICATION CONT'D

o **Technical information,** which is necessary to carry out the work in the project.

  o For software systems, one of the challenges in this area is to ensure that all stakeholders form a shared view about the system being built.

  o This might require some attention to take into account the different skills and competencies of the stakeholders involved.

o **Project status information,** which is necessary to understand whether activities are being carried out as planned.

  o This information is essential to evaluate and take action if any deviation occurs and to make sure that all stakeholders are aware of such changes.

  o One of the points of attention in this area is to establish good and reliable data collection practices.

MANAGING COMMUNICATION CONT'D

o**Project decisions,** which are necessary to ensure that the proper choices are taken and the project moves in the right direction.

o**Project action items,** which include all the information necessary to ensure that the plan is implemented, activities are actually started, and project outputs are actually collected and stored.

o**Project advertisement,** which is necessary to ensure that stakeholders are informed and engaged. Although not necessary in any projects, ensuring that a project gets proper publicity and dissemination can help create a favorable environment.

oInternal meetings, updates to senior management, and dissemination to the public, conferences, and workshops are some of the means.

PLANNING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

1. Communication always happens through a noisy channel.

- *What we say is not always what we intend and what our listeners perceive is not always what we said.*
- *We intend ABC and people perceive ACD.*

o**Various factors can influence the amount of *noise* we have to deal with in a discussion, including:**

o**cultural differences** (think, e.g., different etiquette in use by different cultures),

o**language barriers** (think, e.g., teams for which the project official language is not their mother tongue),

o**personality traits** (think, e.g., the different personality types we discussed in Section 5.1.4),

o**capacity to assert and listen** (which might depend on personality traits or the project environment, or circumstances),

o**communication means** (think, e.g., the different impact a formal letter has with respect to the same topic sent by email or discussed in person).

PLANNING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY CONT'D

2. The second consideration is that a good communication plan delivers the right information, to the right people, at the right time.

o Information raises the correct level of attention in the right stakeholders, when the moment arrives.

o To make the point clearer, consider the opposite scenario, a situation in which all project information is distributed to all stakeholders, regardless of type and role. Since many pieces of information will turn out to be irrelevant to many stakeholders, they will soon lower their attention and miss the important information. Similarly for timing: send a communication about an internal meeting 4 months in advance and few will remember it (or, more likely, so many things will happen in between that the chosen time slot will have to be changed). Send it 1 hour before the meeting and no one will be able to attend.

PLANNING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY CONT'D

3. Another important aspect to consider is the means.

o The same information, in fact, can be delivered in different ways:

o meetings,

o workshops,

o emails,

o letters,

o document repositories,

o chats,

o phone calls, to mention a few.

PLANNING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY CONT'D

4. An appropriate mean can be chosen by looking at the following factors:

o The **recipients** and, in particular, whether the recipient will be able to use the information with the mean we have chosen.

o The **logistics** and, in particular, the cost, in terms of time and resources, of delivering the information with the mean we have chosen.

o The **formality** and, in particular, the kind of impact the mean could have on the recipient. In fact, some information is better exchanged with traceable means and is better written than spoken.

o The opposite also holds, however, and some communications are better spoken in person, rather than written.

PLANNING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY CONT'D

5. List of stakeholders to be involved and lines of communication.

o Starting from the *project roster*, the *stakeholder map*, and the *RACI matrix*, the project manager defines the line of communications, namely, who is made aware of what.

o **Communication means**. According to the project constraints and available infrastructure, the project manager will define how information flows and is made available to stakeholders.

o Digital assets might be distributed through **websites**/**wikis**, **mailing lists**, and **document repositories**, to mention a few.

o **Workshops** and **meetings** are also commonly used.

o Note that some of the means *push* the information to the stakeholders, while others require the stakeholder to be more active and *pull* the information they need.

PLANNING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY CONT'D

6. More detailed plans will also include a specification of the communication timings and triggers, which specify the strategy chosen to deliver information.

○ The simplest strategy is **event driven**: when a specific piece of information is available, it is distributed to the relevant actors.

○ Deliverables are best distributed on an event driven basis. Another possibility is to distribute the information **periodically.**

○ On a regular basis, all new pieces of information are distributed to the project participants.

○ Project status information is often made available periodically.

COMMUNICATION STYLES

Individuals have different **communication styles.** Understanding one's communication style helps to establish a good communication channel. A common characterization distinguishes among.

o **The aggressive communication style,** in which opinions are expressed clearly but without regard for other people's feelings or opinions. It is a communication style that can cause resentment and stress; on certain occasions, for instance, when a decision has to be taken quick, it can be an effective way to take an action.

o **The passive communicators,** who tend to hide their opinions and feelings or open up possibilities for others to disregard one's rights. It is an ineffective form of communication because it does not help to convey opinions and information.

o **The assertive style,** the most direct form of communication—in which opinions are clearly expressed without disregarding other people's feelings and opinions. It is the most effective form of communication. Another characterization distinguishes between **open**, **reserved, indirect**, and **direct** communicators, according to whether one tends to express feelings openly or not (open/reserved) and focuses more on data rather than ideas and opinions. See, for instance, Rampur (2012).

MEETINGS

o If you have ever worked in the IT industry, you probably know that meetings can become a consistent part of your work.

o Unfortunately, many meetings end up being useless or less efficient/effective than they could have been.

o Various books have been written on how to try and make meetings more effective.

o A recent search for "meeting management," in fact, showed 26,302 hits in Amazon's book section.*

o In this section, we look at some common meeting types and some techniques to try and make them more effective.

MANAGING MEETINGS

o Some general rules of thumb can help make your meeting a bit more effective.

o The **first and most important rule is** to define the **meeting goals**, decide who has to **participate** to make the meeting effective, and **select a format** of the meeting so that the goals can be more easily achieved.

o Participants at meetings might have goals different from yours; some may be related to the project, like discussing a specific issue about a technical choice, and some may be just related to other agendas.

o To prevent a meeting from being *hijacked* and drifting, **a second good rule is** to ensure that the meeting remains on track.

o Thus, a good idea, is to define an **agenda of the items** to be discussed, possibly planning in advance a timing for each item, so that we fix both the start and the end time of a meeting. To make sure that the agenda is followed, another good practice is to appoint a **moderator** who takes responsibility for keeping the agenda and ensuring a good interaction among the participants.

MANAGING MEETINGS CONTINUED

o When the goals, participants, and agenda have been defined, a **convocation** is sent out.

o The convocation should at least contain the goals of the meeting, participants, agenda, time, and location.

o If relevant information is required during the meeting, it is also a good practice to tell participants how to get prepared for the meeting.

MANAGING MEETINGS CONTINUED

o The second rule is to stick to the agenda and goals during the meeting.

o First of all, ensure that each participant is provided sufficient context—in advance, if possible, or during the meeting otherwise—to actively participate in the discussion.

o Then, following the agenda, the participants discuss the different items.

o At the end of the discussion, a brief recap of the main findings and of the decisions taken helps share and agree on the findings and results.

MANAGING MEETINGS CONTINUED

o The third rule is to maintain a track of meetings, outputs, and follow-up actions.

o This can be done in different ways.

- In brainstorming sessions, where notes are scribbled on a whiteboard, a picture of the whiteboard might be sufficient.

- Audio recording is another option.

- Writing **meeting minutes** that recap the meeting outputs and actions is a more formal approach. Meeting minutes usually contain the following information:

1. Coordinates of the meeting: time and location.

2. Goal and agenda.

3. Participants and, if required, whether the absentees are justified or not.

4. When required, for each item, a recap of the discussion/main findings. Main outputs (findings) and actions decided during the meeting. These should include a description of the action, a person responsible for the action, a deadline.

MANAGING MEETINGS CONTINUED

o Meeting minutes are an important record of a project, and sometimes drafting, commenting, and approving the minutes can be a delicate and tricky matter.

o Good practice is to ask participants to approve the meeting minutes or to propose changes.

o In some cases, the approval is a formal requirement of the project. Keeping a formal/written track of meetings and meeting outputs is also an important step in tracking actions and establishing effective change and configuration management practices.

o In fact, since meetings will be held to clarify or modify project requirements, choices, and so on, meeting minutes become an essential input to keep a consistent and clear vision of the project and project outputs.

TYPES OF MEETINGS

1. Kick-Off Meetings

Kick-off meetings are held to get started with a project, a work package, or a significant task of the project. The goal is to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are provided the information necessary to carry out the activities about to start.

For this reason, the meeting can be structured in three parts:

1. An introduction of the participants and relevant stakeholders.

2. A presentation about the context and the specific goals that have to be achieved with the activity about to start. The presentation includes all relevant information, including constraints, standards to be followed, allocation of responsibilities, and timing.

3. A final question and answers session allows one to clarify any doubt or remaining issue.

2. DECISION-TAKING MEETINGS

o An essential task of project managers is to establish a good context for taking decisions.

o We have already seen in Section 5.1.5 different management styles and how they influence the decision-taking process.

o According to the Harvard Business School (2006), good decision making requires:

2. DECISION-TAKING MEETINGS CONTINUED

o **Establishing a context for success:** providing time for ideas to form, creating an environment in which an open discussion can take place, and agreeing on the decisions taken.

o **Framing the issue properly** and **finding alternatives:** making sure that the process does not stop at the first formulation of the problem or the first solution encountered. Including opponents and skeptics in the discussion can help take different perspectives and points of view and find alternative solutions.

o **Choosing** the alternative that appears to be the best. Solutions can be measured according to qualitative and quantitative parameters. When choosing what alternative to take, both positive and negative impacts should be debated.

o **The agreement on the decision can be in one of many different forms:** **general consensus** and **majority** occur when everyone or the majority of participants agree; **qualified consensus** occurs when key selected stakeholders agree; and **directive leadership** can be the last resort, when no consensus can be found.

3. AUDIT AND REVIEW MEETING

Audit and review meetings are held to assess the status of a product or project. These meetings are usually organized by identifying three roles:

o The **auditors,** who are responsible for analyzing products or project documentation in order to form an opinion and an evaluation. Good characteristics of auditors include adequate proficiency to carry out the work, independence (so that no interests can influence one way or another the auditing process), and professional care in conducting the audits and in reporting it (EPA, 2000).

o The **project members,** who are responsible for providing clarifications and explaining the choices and status.

o The **moderator,** who ensures that the agenda is followed and the meeting environment remains productive. In fact, since auditors and the selected project members have seemingly conflicting goals, ensuring that a good attitude is kept also ensures that the meeting remains productive.

3. AUDIT AND REVIEW MEETING CONTINUED

o Audit meetings can be triggered by various causes, among which a periodic evaluation, a project deliverable, a potential problem, accidents, and improving performances.

o An auditing process might include the following activities:

o Definition of the goals and boundaries of the audit

o Identification of the auditing committee

o Distribution of all the relevant material to the auditors

o Preparation of the auditing by the auditors

o The conduction of the analysis and auditing activities during the meeting

o Preparation of the final report

BRAINSTORMING

o Brainstorming is a technique described by Alex Osborn in Osborn (2008), a book first published in 1948, in which the author describes the techniques used in the creative firm where he worked.

o The term **brainstorming** is used simply to denote a meeting to collect ideas, **brainstorming meetings** have a precise structure and precise rules.

o Concerning the structure, following an opening session, where the problem is framed and rules explained, brainstorming meetings are structured in rounds to collect ideas, possibly stimulated by the meeting organizer, or solicited by having each participant propose at least one idea.

o A wrap-up session allows one to collect all the information in a structured way.

o Concerning rules, to ensure that ideas are properly elicited and collected, Obsorn suggests the following:

BRAINSTORMING CONTINUED

o**Focus on quantity** and **welcome unusual ideas.** The more ideas that are generated, the more chances there are of finding good ones; for this reason, unusual ideas are to be welcomed in the brainstorming process.

o**Withhold criticism.** In brainstorming, criticism should be withheld. Instead, participants should focus on extending or adding to ideas, reserving criticism for a later stage of the process. By suspending judgment, participants will feel free to generate unusual ideas.

o**Combine and improve ideas.** The underlying assumption is that the sum is bigger than the individual contributions, and therefore combining ideas yields better results.

BRAINSTORMING CONTINUED

o An important aspect of the technique is highlighting associations among ideas, so that they can then be grouped and combined at a later stage.

o Brainstorming meetings can be conducted in many different ways. See, for instance, Colwell (2004) or a discussion about the organization of brainstorming sessions and Mittleman (2013) for some variations to the technique.

o Researchers have criticized some of Obsorn's assumptions, among which, ironically, the fact that criticisms have to be withheld.

o More radical criticisms question the need for the rules described above and attribute the effectiveness of the technique more to the interaction of different minds and mindsets than to other contributing factors. See Lehrer (2013) for a very nice recap on the matter.

OTHER CREATIVE TECHNIQUES

o Many other creative techniques have been proposed and are largely applied.

o **Six hats technique,** according to which six different mindsets are defined, represented by hats of six different colors.

o People participating in the meeting are asked to take a hat and provide feedback according to the corresponding mindset.

o Mindsets are then shifted while the meeting continues; see Bono (2013) for more details.
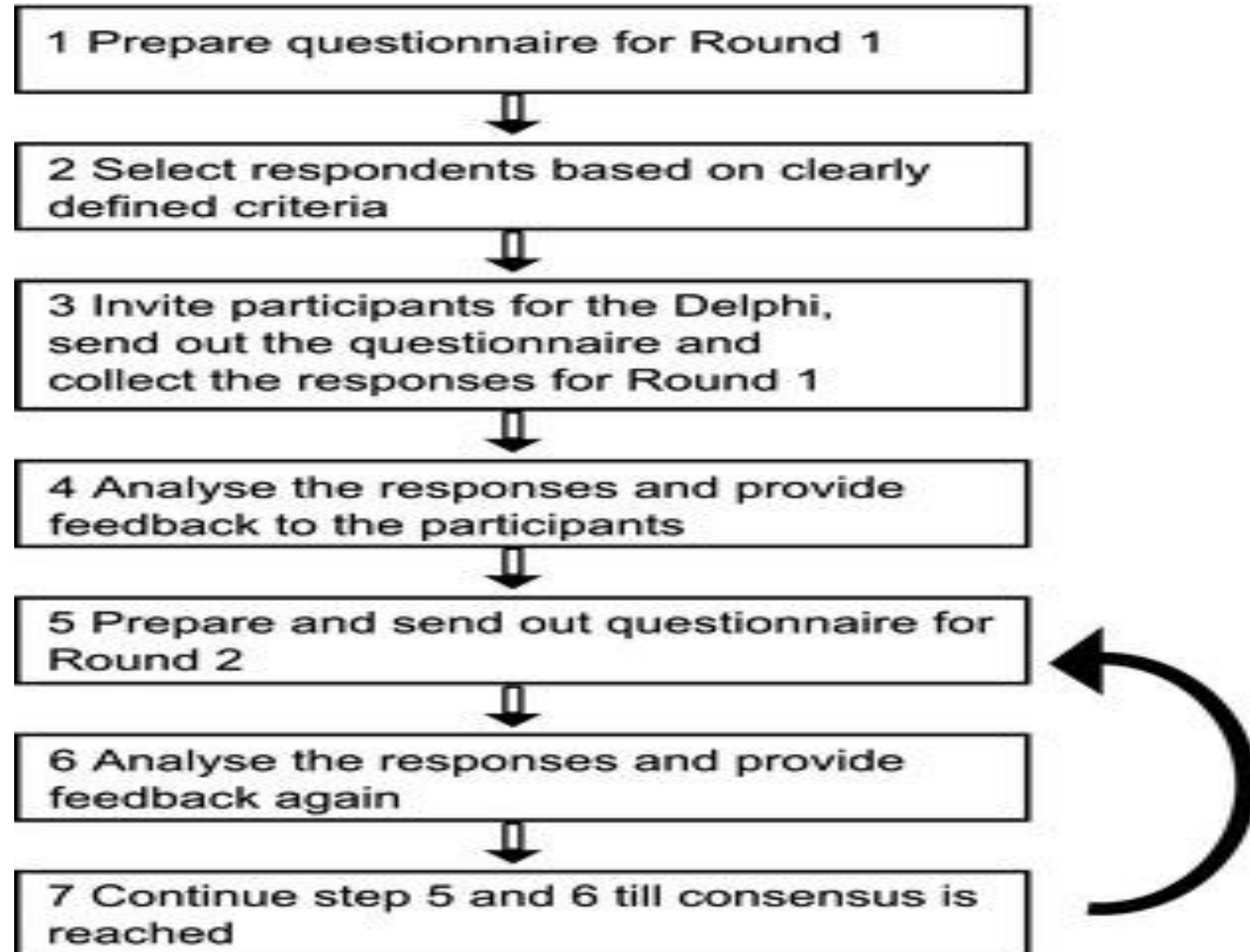
DELPHI

o The Delphi method was devised in the 1960s by Helmer et al. (1967) to improve the **effectiveness of meetings.**

o One of the goals was create an environment in which nonscientific factors such as "who has the loudest voice," "stubbornness," or "supposed authority" would not be allowed to bias data.

o The methodology focuses on collecting data, but the format is general enough to accommodate other kinds of information gathering.

o The   method   is   composed   of   the   following   steps:

DELPHI CONTINUED

o Deliver a set of question to the experts (best if in the form of a questionnaire), such as, for instance, the effort required for each activity of the plan.

o Have the experts use their techniques to come out with an answer (the original paper emphasizes the importance of simulation, but in general, any technique is fine).

o Collect answers and highlight the median value and the interquartile range, that is, the interval containing the majority of opinions.

o Ask the experts to reconsider their opinion and, if the estimations are still out of the interquartile range, have them, motivate their choices.

o Iterate, presenting also the motivations for outliers, till the closest match to the consensus can be derived.

DELPHI CONTINUED

PLANNING POKER

o **Planning poker** is a modern (and fun) version of the Delphi technique, adopted by agile methodologies for the estimation of the difficulty associated with the development of user stories and tasks. The technique can, however, be used for other purposes.

o Planning poker takes its name from the fact that participants at the meetings are given a deck of cards and seem to be playing a card game.

o In more detail, the cards are organized in colors and each color contains all the possible estimations a person can give to a given user story.

o Note that the values are a limited set of numbers, for instance, following the Fibonacci series (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, . . .); two special values, "**infinity**" and "**?,**" mean, respectively, *extremely complex* or *"I don't know."*

o Each person is given all the cards in a color.

PLANNING POKER CONTINUED

o The game proceeds as follows.

o For each user story, users are asked to provide their estimations.

o Following the Delphi approach, they do so in secret, by picking one card from their decks.

o Everyone shows their cards at the same time. If the evaluations agree, the user story is assigned the weight chosen by the team.

o However, if there is significant disagreement in the evaluations, a discussion follows so that the players can justify their choices.

o Similar to Delphi, other rounds then follow till an agreement is reached.

o As a curiosity, the technique also considers the case in which an agreement is not reached.

o Following the words of Grenning, the inventor of the technique, "the team can then discuss their different estimates and try to get to consensus. If you can't get consensus, don't sweat it. It is only one story out of many. Defer the story, split it, or take the low estimate" (Grenning, 2002).