

So I was asked to contribute to an article that asked the Question.. How can you document project requirements clearly? That is a profound question but the responses were limited to 750 characters. So I just included a few bullets with limited explanations and said I would post my more complete answer on my feed. This was a quick response, I did not pour over it for grammar, spelling and punctuation. So if you are bothering to read this and want to get something useful out of it. Make an effort to understand the intent of my words and not how they are typed. Also, I am copying and pasting from notepad hopefully it doesn't ruin the formatting or lack of it and detract from the answer.

Such an innocuous seeming question?

However, with years of experience you learn to not just jump in with an equally authoritative answer just to show how smart you are. My answer as it is with so many other seemingly easy questions is "That depends". Reading the answers provided so far demonstrates my point. Everyone has provided an answer that probably would be valid and work for them but their answers are based on their perspective and industry.

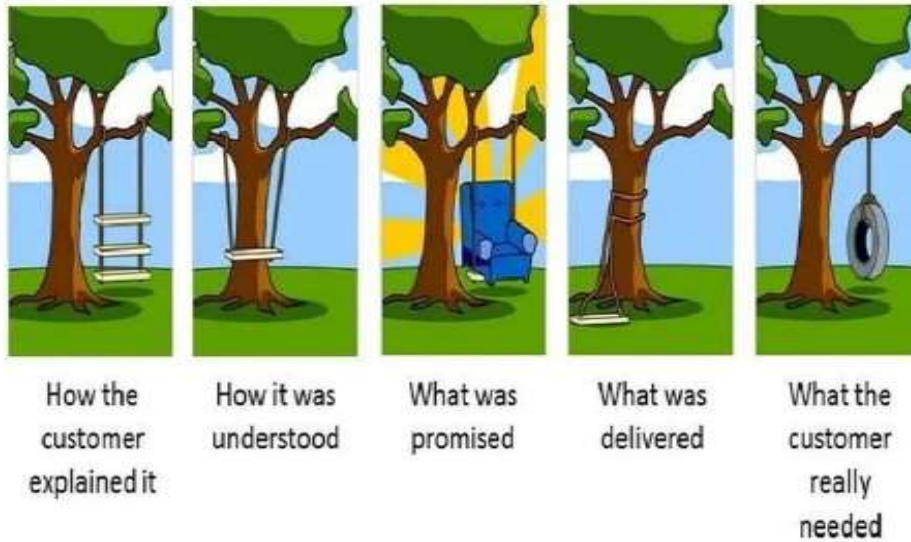
Firstly, I will explain a few items of additional information needed for me to provide a cogent answer that supports my "that depends" premise.

1. Type and size of organization. - Is it a single technology, product, or application focused org or a normal organization. Is it a small, medium or large organization? Is the organization single tenet or does it have multiple locations? is it a multi-national organization.
2. What type of project environment does the organization operate with. Dedicated project teams, or is it an org that uses matrixed project teams.
3. Who is "the key" stakeholder or is it a committee? Is the Stakeholder/s internal to org, or is your org being contracted to perform the project?
4. What "Flavor" of project management is expected to be used. Trust me, a lot of people that do not really truly understand "project management" will sermonize how one methodology is superior over another and how only it should be used. Are we using Waterfall, Agile, Six Sigma, Lean, Kanban, Prince2, CPM, Scrum..... (Fully answering this one is a post in itself)

These items are important factors when considering the answer to the question posed and the 4 suggestions listed are a decent vague list of good practices. However, I will try (I say try because it makes sense to me) to convince you that by simplifying this question even more it will become a "higher truth" that can be applied in every situation, every interaction for everything in your life. I will even go so far as to state that frequent and consistent application of this higher truth is will assist you in becoming a better leader/employee, husband/wife, parent/child, friend/human.

Back to the Question? Anyone that is involved in being a professional project manager and has pursued standardized professional training and or certification will probably recognize that this question is the textual representation of the project management tree swing cartoon.

# The Tree Swing Cartoon



*Note: Original source unknown. However, from [businessballs.com](http://businessballs.com) I found this reference "thanks S Hytche, 29 Oct 2010): "As a college student back in 1968-69, I worked part-time in IT key punch operations. The tree swing was around then to show what end-users got from 'systems people' and to make the point that the users needed to be involved in all phases of the development process..." (This logically refers to the 'IT Project' version of the tree swing cartoons, rather than the 'marketing' version, or 'teacher' version.)"*

Ok, that cartoon exemplifies the "higher truth" that I am edging you toward, and the lack of understanding of its role and importance is most likely the root cause of 90+ % of the world's problems and conflicts. Drum roll please..... **"The lack of effective communication"**. So, the simplified question where any task can be inserted becomes. How can you "communicate" clearly?

LOL, it sounds so simple doesn't it. It definitely is not, it could be if everyone realized how profound of a difference it would make if they actively kept this in mind on a daily basis and made a concerted effort to constantly improve. This issue has existed since the dawn of humans. It has just gotten exponentially worse since the advent of the internet, globalization, email and the significant uptick in diversity (normally a huge positive but has some pitfalls to be avoided). The thing that first attracted me to Project management to begin with and the reason for #4 above is "commonality of language". When I first discovered the PM framework methodology I was super excited because that is the way my brain already operated and why I would always volunteer and subsequently successfully complete tasks that everyone else thought impossible but I never could explain how I did it. Here are some simple facts to consider in order to communicate project requirements more effectively.

**1. Use or at least identify the common language framework** - This way mostly everyone is on the same page from the beginning as to how to interpret a word and/or how it is used in context of the project. (especially important for large orgs, multinational orgs and highly diverse orgs)

**2. Train your actively listening skill** - This is hard for many because it requires you to keep your mouth shut and actually hear what the other is saying. By doing this, you may better understand the intent of what they are trying to describe as being a requirement even though their words might not be clear. Unfortunately, many times the people writing SOW are not technical or fully versed in what they need to be able to accurately describe requirements fully. This leads into the next point.

**3. Understand that a high percentage of communication is non-verbal and take mitigation steps.** Not going to argue on the validity of the studies or the exact percentages because that just misses the point. The fact is a significantly large part of "communicating effectively" is non-verbal or to go further and more to the point I'll say it a different way. A very small percentage of "effectively communicating" (somewhere in the <10% range) are the words themselves. Either spoken or written.

Consider that for a minute, does that explain all the useless arguments you've had trying to explain "That's not what I meant at all", "how did you get that from what I said?" and blaming the other party. In reality it was really your (and mine) fault for not considering all of these factors and working extra hard to compensate and communicate what you meant the first time. This is why I HATE email with a passion and why I have always been significantly more successful than my peers. Call it lucky based on a character flaw. My flaw is that I have a very direct writing style especially in email, facts to the point no flowery language beating around the bush etc. In my head I reason that I'm trying to prevent the tldr; syndrome. Presenting only facts, tasks, timelines in as clear a manner as possible so the important stuff doesn't get overlooked in all the fluff. Semi-effective for a team that knows me very well, but for most the most common feeling /reaction is why are you so aggressive, why are you yelling at me or just making some poor soul feel bad like they got scolded. Again, I learned this fact the hard way. Thus, I maximize face to face communication as much as humanly possible. I can say exactly the same words as in the email but combined with my tone of voice, body language, gestures and facial expressions they are not focused on how they felt when they read my email (ignoring all the important stuff that I tried so hard to detail for them) but just receiving all the "good stuff".

Take those issues and they are only a small few and multiply them when dealing with a largely diverse group, or companies from different cultures where words, common colloquialisms, body language, facial expressions and tone of voice can mean something totally different than in your culture and it is maddening. Even so making a concerted effort in recognizing these impediments and actively, consistently keep them in mind deploying mitigations whenever possible will definitely improve your life, relationships as well as your projects. But alas it is easy to forget, so make it part of a process.

**3. "DO NOT ASSUME"** Everyone has heard this 1,000,000 times. This is especially true when establishing requirements and circles back to #2. Just because they explained and you think you understood remember the PM Cartoon and all of the above, it matters! verify that your understanding is exactly the same as theirs. Item 3 on the article list (use diagrams and visuals) comes in handy here. Also, many of PM's have ruined projects because they knew just enough to be dangerous. If you are not a subject matter expert (SME) then either include one or consult one when determining requirements. What seems easy, quick and cheap to an Executive Stakeholder and Project Manager isn't always the case when a SME gets involved. Better to fully understand right up front.

Sure what you want is easy, cheap and shouldn't take long BUT to do that we need to do X,Y,Z first other wise it will be useless or .... You get the point.

conclusion: *How can you document projects requirements clearly?* change the question to point towards the actual issue not the effect of it. Fix the cause and the effect disappears. **The new question is How can you communicate clearly?**