# Book Communications Skills for Project Managers

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## Recommendation

If you work in a large, complex organization that routinely handles expensive interdepartmental projects, this book is for you. Michael Campbell presents the basics of communications theory with techniques that can improve the interplay among project team members and their stakeholders. Unfortunately, Campbell built the book around a long, detailed case study threaded through the narrative. The hypothetical tale is a noble attempt to personalize methodical project management guidance, but as readers follow the people and job titles in the account, it tends to bog down in jargon, predictability and plodding detail. Indeed, without the case study, the book would still be useful and far more concise. *BooksInShort* recommends this text to serious students of project management's intricate details and to novice project managers, who will learn necessary strategic lessons about communicating during a complicated, ongoing project.

## Take-Aways

- Project failure generally relates in some way to poor communications.
- Every project has many variables, but only three goals: to create something, to stay within the budget and to finish on time.
- A project's authorizing charter defines its funding, duties, scope, assumptions, risks, benefits and schedule.
- Good communications keeps everyone involved, from the project team to the top brass.
- It can unify your stakeholders and build cooperation for your goals.
- Build your communications program by analyzing your audience, planning your message and choosing the right person to deliver it.
- Messages from the project manager can instruct, inspire, stimulate or advocate.
- People "backslide" from change if they receive ineffective explanations. Overseeing a project means managing and communicating about change.
- A project manager must meet the varied communication needs of all stakeholders.
- Remain aware of company politics and perceptions so your message is on target.

## Summary

### Bridging the Gaps

Companies embark upon projects to elevate their performance. When your project is a technical success but customers don't understand it and, therefore, don't use it, your project's business mission has failed – all due to a communication gap between your firm and its audience. When you carry out an internal project to institute a great upgrade in your corporate systems, but your employees won't adopt it, chalk another failure up to a bad flow of information. Project managers can prevent such expensive gaps by improving their communications planning and execution.

> "With vigorous project communications, your chances of success soar and your frustration will fall off dramatically."

Until about 1990, only complex engineering undertakings, such as heavy construction projects, used professional project management techniques. The transition to applying these techniques to mainstream business projects has been problematic. Project managers using these methods often fail to communicate successfully with their constituencies. They bring projects to completion without input from relevant parties who had anticipated being consulted. This creates false expectations, and makes projects slower and more difficult. A survey of 500 project managers found that poor communications is the most common cause of project failure. Projects which have active management involvement and a good, consistent flow of communication among team members and stakeholders achieved higher rates of success.

> "All projects are generally undertaken because they are part of a plan to take an organization to a new level of performance."

A cost-benefit analysis or feasibility study precedes most big projects. The study covers a general estimate of costs, risks and capabilities. Company leaders use it to determine if a project makes good business sense under prevailing circumstances. Project managers should halt projects when pivotal conditions change or the business benefit evaporates. Meanwhile, if you are managing an ongoing project, make sure your team members understand its objectives. Every project has many variables, but only three goals: create something, remain within the budget and finish on time.

## Leadership Involvement

Projects benefit from top executive involvement, particularly projects with an element of change management. To succeed with a change management project, designate a "sponsor," "champion" and "Working Committee." The sponsor makes the project succeed and communicates with executives. The champion conveys the project's business value to others in the company. The working committee delivers the project's actual benefits to customers. It aligns the project within the company and keeps all the constituencies informed about its progress. The committee can consist of specialists who solve problems and act as liaisons with other parties. This is especially important when working with middle management, which traditionally has been the most reluctant layer to accept change. If the project affects a small subset of people or has to deal with a specific problem, form a specialized internal working group.

## The Project Charter

The project's charter authorizes the work and defines the funding, duties, scope, assumptions, risks, benefits and schedule. The charter should be specific and easy to understand, with short, simple sentences. Projects often go astray because people work on the wrong problems, usually due to confusion between a project manager and a stakeholder. The right charter can avoid such mix-ups.

> "Often the rationale for a project and the expected business case are not widely known beyond a few key individuals."

To align the project with the company's requirements, the project manager should clearly describe the business problem in the project charter, which explains the situation and highlights primary issues. "Scope" defines what the project will and will not accomplish. Often, stakeholders with different priorities and perspectives disagree with project managers on what a project should include. Correct such disconnects early; late corrections are costly and time consuming.

> "If...projects failed, poor communications was always identified as a critical factor."

Your project charter should also include an assessment of anticipated risks. For example, projects can get derailed when end-customers don't (or, because of business climate changes, can't) use the final product or service. Or, leaders can abandon a project, because it is too costly, or a former executive began it and now it lacks internal support.

## Assembling the Team

The project team is the project manager's main communication link with important stakeholders. Evaluate potential team members based on their skills, availability and experience in crucial roles.

> "To align the project to business requirements...put the business problem into your own words."

Promote your project to its constituents, the customers who will reap its economic, technical and practical benefits. They may include your firm's finance, marketing, sales, manufacturing and customer-relations personnel. Ask what they need the project to accomplish. As it advances, keep them informed. Remain open to information from stakeholders. The team members who communicate with internal participants should be aware of the corporate culture, company politics, departmental protocol, key relationships and informal hierarchies.

> "Stakeholders ...have a vested interest in the outcome of the project, even if they do not fund or participate in the project directly."

The project manager must be able to explain why the firm is undertaking the project and creating change. This involves having the project team write a "Case for Change" for the working committee's review. This document states the consequences of not doing the project, and outlines its benefits, its time line and what practices it will affect. Having the case prepared for the working committee's first meeting boosts productivity, since it focuses the discussion.

## Basic Communications

The core elements of any communications program are analyzing, planning and delivering the message. First analyze your target audience, which is often made up of the stakeholders, including executives, operational users, the project champion, the working committee and others who will benefit from the project. Stakeholders have different communication needs. Present information to them in the most effective way (be it tables, graphs or reports) based on the questions it must address. When you deliver your message, word it clearly. Avoid jargon and "consultant speak." Using the right language will affect your credibility. Specify the reason you are sending a message, for example, to instruct, inspire, stimulate or advocate a point of view. With every communication you deliver, use a specific approach tailored to its audience.

> "Every time you communicate with people, your project team, stakeholders or anyone else, you must keep their perspectives in mind."

Choose among these four communication strategies:

1. **Move in order from the most important information to the least important** – When you present numerous variables that can determine a project's outcome, prioritize the information. For instance, when team members select a vendor, they may rank experience above price.
2. **State the problems and then the solutions** – This is the best approach in a technical situation. Sometimes, you can phrase this material as questions and answers.
3. **Use the big-picture approach** – This works when you are trying to show how a project will benefit an entire company or department. It is useful when management needs to see how a smaller project will help companywide.
4. **Show how the new approach is different** – This is particularly beneficial if a project has been tried in the past and failed. Demonstrate how the current version is different and why it will benefit stakeholders.

> "Use words that will resonate with the people the project impacts."

The way people recall information depends on how you convey it. The main variables are "frequency," "primacy," "recency" and "emotion." People remember things they hear often (frequency). They remember messages they hear first (primacy), since that creates a mental benchmark. People remember data they heard most currently (recency), so as information changes over time, keep them updated. A message that affects the audience's emotions, such as information about how the project will affect employment, makes the biggest impact. The message can be oral or written; a combination is the most effective. A 3M Corporation study found that people remember "10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, and 60% of what they see, hear and read."

## The "Victim Mentality"

When a project brings about change, employees can feel resentful, particularly if they think the change is plowing ahead without their consent or input. So that you don't create any reason for people to develop what is known as a "victim mentality," involve each business unit early in the project's life. To increase cooperation and participation, help people analyze how their activities will change and how they will benefit.

> "Let me reiterate a basic point that has hurt hundreds of projects over the years: Sending out email messages is not communicating!"

To diagnose the changes a project should bring about, call upon analysts who are trained to identify problems and client needs, and then create solutions. Be aware that even after extensive project planning and work, employees and managers often don't fully adopt new approaches. They may revert to their old practices. Such "backsliding" can begin when people start to miss – or skip – regularly scheduled meetings. Ask the working committee to help project members realign their priorities. Understand that people resist change, but stress the importance of utilizing the new tactics.

> "Much of the reluctance that people within a company feel about these kinds of initiatives is the sense that the project is happening to them rather than with them."

The project team must take these steps to implement its project:

- **Make the case for change** – Explain why a change is needed to improve the company's processes. In the project completion phase, include feedback from the new users.
- **Understand how processes will change once the project is delivered** – Communicate specifically about which processes will change. Develop messages to explain how the changes affect billing, invoicing or production schedules.
- **Provide support** – Use training sessions and online tutorials to show the target audience what the project will bring them. Create and distribute manuals for any new operating procedures.
- **Develop a training course** – Help your target audience understand what your project will deliver. One company recruited a business analyst and a working committee member to host 20-minute demonstrations introducing a new customer relations management (CRM) program. Supervisors encouraged staff members to attend the meetings, which the company promoted with posters and e-mails.
- **Present a timetable** – Tell people when to expect delivery of various project elements. Customize your time schedule; publish only those deadlines that affect the group you are addressing. Build communication time into your overall project schedule.

## Managing Perceptions and Risks

People have deep individual concerns about projects that change their work environment. Determine how you will deliver project-related messages to them in terms of your word choice, setting, medium, timing and content. Analyze your stakeholders so you can incorporate these variables in a tailored communications plan. Consider who will deliver the message.

> "People who operate out of fear of projects and the products and services they deliver are usually seeing only the worst-case scenario."

Each audience has different communication requirements; some need more data than others. For instance, a CRM conversion process could affect people in sales and marketing more than those in manufacturing and research. Use a speaker with the right characteristics to deliver your message. Subject matter experts have the highest credibility when it comes to persuading people about the technical merits of making a change. Executives hold positions of authority and connote mandatory compliance. Similarly, influential people can spearhead a high level of cooperation.

> "The sense of being orphaned without management support or even interest can cause severe morale problems."

Any project faces technical, business or organizational risks. Technical risks are often known and predictable, while a project may suffer a business risk when the project produces the right results or "deliverables," but they fail to yield a financial benefit.

Organizational risks arise when people don't adopt the project's changes. Manage your communication strategies by assessing the levels of probability and potential

impact of given risks. Evaluate such risks as a leading person leaving the team. Let your working committee know you prepared contingency plans, like having backup personnel in mind. When risks arise, inform your stakeholders and keep them appraised. Stay positive and frame the situation productively.

## About the Author

**Michael Campbell** is the president of the Energy Practice at MCA International. He is the author of *Bulletproof Presentations* and co-author of the fourth edition of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Project Management.*