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Targeted communication: the key to effective stakeholder engagement

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Abstract

Just as each project is unique, so are its stakeholders! Whether as individuals, groups or organizations, every stakeholder, and every stakeholder community has a unique and evolving set of cultures, expectations and perceptions. To engage with, and influence, this diverse community the traditional approach to project communications of regular reports and other 'one size fits all' strategies need to be replaced. Effective communication strategies take into account the complexity of the people who work with, or benefit from, the outcomes of the project; and manages the constantly changing group of people whose support and involvement are essential to project success. The conceptual paper is based on the widely used *Stakeholder Circle* methodology, and defines a structured but flexible approach to identifying and engaging a project's stakeholders throughout the lifecycle of the project. The methodology describes ways to identify and prioritise stakeholders, understand their needs and expectations, develop targeted communication strategies to influence attitudes and behaviour, and then to measure the effectiveness of the overall strategy in maintaining support from the key positive stakeholders and reducing opposition from negative stakeholders.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement; effective communication; culture.

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1. Introduction

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), Humpty Dumpty and Alice are having a conversation...

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'" Alice said.

Humpty dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

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Alice's concern was appropriate: how can communication be effective if words can mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean? If the message is confusing and open to misunderstandings and misinterpretation, because of the wrong choice of words, emphasis, or delivery, how can it be effective?

Research has found that 'communication competence' determines the success of a project or organizational activity (Clutterbuck, 2001). 'Communication competence' is developed through the following factors:

- Understanding of the stakeholder community and developing a robust relationship between the project team and its stakeholders
- Effective information sharing: the right information at the right time for people to do their jobs, share opinions, discuss ideas and learn from each other.

This conceptual paper will be organized as follows: the first section is a description of the *Stakeholder Circle* methodology and its relevance for the development of effective communication strategies. The second section is a discussion of the elements that make each one of us unique – personality, 'reality', culture, gender and age: these elements will need to be considered for communication beyond regular reporting, when the project team identifies stakeholders who are not sufficiently engaged and who will require additional information to improve that situation. The final section merges the discussions of the first two sections to focus on how to develop targeted communication directed at improving engagement of these stakeholders.

2. A methodology for stakeholder engagement

Stakeholders are defined in the *PMBOK Guide*® (PMI, 2012) (563) as:

Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organizations who may affect, be affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project, program, or portfolio.

2.1. A stakeholder has a 'stake'

Extending the PMI definition, a stakeholder has a stake in the activity, project or program. For successful engagement, it is necessary to understand the nature of a stakeholder's stake in the outcomes of the project. This stake may be:

- Interest: *a circumstance in which a person or group will be affected by a decision, action or outcome.* Consider a public event being conducted in a residential area: for the time that event is running people living in the vicinity of the event will have an *interest*, even if they do not enjoy or participate in that event.
- Rights – legal or moral: legal rights are usually enshrined in a country's legislation: examples include Privacy laws and Occupational Health and Safety. Moral rights refer to environmental, heritage or social issues. They may extend to speaking on behalf of countries or individuals who cannot speak for themselves or defend themselves, and encompass both the activists and the 'victims'.
- Ownership: such as a worker's right to earn their living from their knowledge; shareholders' ownership of a portion of an organization's assets; intellectual property resulting from the exploitation of an idea; legal title to an asset or a property.
- Knowledge: application of experience or knowledge to the work of the project. It is important to the organization's, or project's, success: the team member will also have a 'stake' in the outcomes of the project.
- Contribution: allocation of resources – people or materials, provision of funds – either the initial approval or ongoing assurance of continued funding, provision of 'political support' within the organization's hierarchy or the wider community.

2.2. Stakeholder engagement

Engagement can be defined as: the various communication practices, processes and actions that an organization (or project team) must perform to involve stakeholders to secure their involvement and

commitment, or reduce their indifference or hostility.

Engagement means that the project's stakeholders are aware of the project, and its outcomes and are prepared to have the necessary involvement, participation and interest in the work. Some groups or individuals can influence project success through provision (or withholding) of funds, support, or resources. Others will self-select - protesters, objectors or authorities.

2.3. Expectations

Everybody has expectations. These are conscious or unconscious needs, desires or wants and are specific to each individual. In developing robust relationships a starting point can be a general understanding of the 'stakes' of stakeholder:

- Owners or shareholders have a financial stake in the business: they expect a financial return.
- Employees have their jobs and their livelihood at stake: in return for their labour they expect job security, wages and benefits and meaningful work.
- Customers and suppliers expect to receive some benefits from supply or purchase of products and services.
- The local community grants the organization the right to build facilities within its boundaries. The community benefits from taxes and contributions of the organization back into the community. The community expects the organization to be a good citizen – not to expose the community to unreasonable hazards in the form of pollution or toxic waste.

2.4. Analyzing the stakeholder community

The project's success or failure is linked to the effectiveness of its various communications being directed towards the right stakeholders at the right times during the life of the project. The **Stakeholder Circle** methodology provides a flexible approach for defining the stakeholder community, applying the right level of engagement and identifying the information and communication needed to influence each stakeholder's perception, expectations and actions. to building relationships within and around the project.

There are five steps to the **Stakeholder Circle** methodology:

- *Step 1:* identification of all stakeholders
- *Step 2:* prioritization to determine who is important
- *Step 3:* visualization to understand the overall stakeholder community
- *Step 4:* engagement through effective communications
- *Step 5:* monitoring the effect of the engagement.

Step 1: identify develops a list of stakeholders, defining the stake and expectations of each stakeholder and the relative position of each stakeholder around the project.

In *Step 2: prioritize*, the team must assess which stakeholders are more important at this time. A system for rating and therefore ranking stakeholders according to their relative importance is based on three sets of questions about:

1. *Power:* the power an individual or group may have to permanently change or stop the project.
2. *Proximity:* the degree of involvement that the individual or group has in the work of the team.
3. *Urgency:* the importance of the work or its outcomes, whether positive or negative, to certain stakeholders (their stake), and how prepared they are to act to achieve these outcomes.

Step 3: visualize produces a map of the stakeholder to show which stakeholders are most important. More information is available at www.stakeholdermapping.com.

Step 4 engage identifies the current attitude of a stakeholder and the actions needed to support or change this attitude by assessing each stakeholder's level of support and how receptive they are to information about the project. Engagement profiles are developed by assessing the actual attitude of selected stakeholders and describing a realistic target attitude necessary for success of the project. Figure 1 shows an example of a stakeholder's engagement profile.

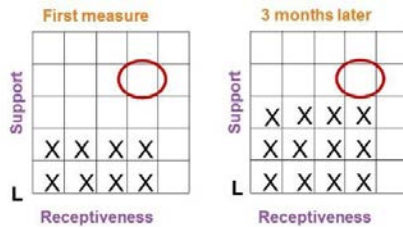


Figure 1 - monitoring stakeholder engagement – comparing results over time.

The stakeholder in Figure 1 has been assessed at level (2) denoting a low level of support and at level (4) for a relatively high level of interest in information about the project. For project success, the engagement profile SHOULD BE (4) and (4). In this case, the gap between the current engagement profile and the target profile indicates that a high level of effort will be required to develop communication strategies for this stakeholder, to encourage a higher level of support for the work of the project.

Step 5: monitor is focussed on processes to ensure the plan is implemented, the results of the communication activities are monitored and evaluated and the plan is revised where appropriate. The second assessment (three months later) in Figure 1 reveals that some progress had been made, but more work is necessary to achieve the desired level of engagement. If there had been no change, it would have indicated that the communication has not been effective and that the strategy needs to be reviewed.

3. What makes us unique?

3.1. Our 'reality' and how we 'see'

Each person constructs a different reality: each brain sees the world according to its own wiring, and selects or ignores information depending on its filters. Neuroscience has interpreted this process as the result of each person's brain automating much of what it perceives to ensure energy is conserved for conscious thought processes. (Weick, 1995) has termed the process 'sensemaking' – a filter through which everything experienced, consciously or unconsciously, is passed. (Horowitz, 2013) described this phenomenon of how we 'see', by describing what happens when she turned a daily 'walking around the block' with her dog into an exercise of perception. She invited people from different professions to walk with her and describe what they 'saw'. Each one of them drew her attention to different aspects of the same route she had walked on many times before. Each person: psychiatrist, botanist, her 19 month-old son, an architect and eight others all 'saw' aspects of that block that she could never have imagined.

Over time every routine process tends to become an automated subconscious action or perception that frames the person's experiences of all new encounters. It also frames how we prefer to receive information and how we interpret that information.

3.2. Personality

Personality refers to an individual's distinct pattern of thoughts, motives, values, attitudes and behaviors. There are many typologies for categorizing personality, the Myers-Briggs Indicator (MBTI) is the most well-known of the personality categorisers. It measures psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions (Kroeger & Thuesen, 1988). The combination of four alternatives types results in sixteen possible preferences. These four types are pairs of alternative preferences:

- Introversion (I) or Extraversion (E) – 'attitudes'
- Sensing (S) and Intuition (N) – 'functions'
- Thinking (T) and Feeling (F) – 'functions'
- Judging (J) and Perception (P) – 'lifestyle'.

Personality affects the way an individual reacts to the environment and how we prefer to receive information.

3.3 Culture

Culture is an individual's patterns of thinking, feeling and acting learned over a lifetime: often in ways that he or she is not aware of. It is learned throughout childhood and continues into adult life through language and other symbols; role models and heroes such as parents, friends, celebrities; rituals such as recognising 'coming of age', courtship, marriage, and the individual's basic values.

Cultural diversity may take many forms, including:

- Generational: a project community may consist of different generational groups: baby boomers; Gen X, Y.
- Professional: managers; professionals (engineers, accountants, teachers); workers.
- National: consider a mix of Asian; Anglo-American; Latino cultures.

Each cultural grouping exhibits a preferred style of communication, leadership, values and attitudes to work. Much of the literature on leadership, teams, management and organizations has been developed in the Anglo-American countries – primarily USA, and the UK (and Australia). Therefore it is culturally specific. When operating in a culturally diverse environment, a theory or approach that was developed within the Anglo-American context may not translate well into the various cultures represented in the team, and adaptations may need to be considered.

3.4 Generational culture

Researchers seek to understand generational differences through a focus on aspects of the behaviors of generational 'cohorts'. (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2013) has categorised the three potential generations that operate in the workplace today as:

- *Baby Boomers*: born 1943 to 1960
- *Gen X*: born 1960 to 1980
- *Gen Y*: born 1980 to 2000.

Table 1 shows some of the differences between these three generations in the areas of values, work ethic, leadership styles and communication preferences.

3.5 Gender

We also think of ourselves in terms of gender – even if we don't realize it!. The social context we grow up in influences who we are, how we think, and what we do. There exists in every society a men's culture and a women's culture. In the more masculine culture found in the Anglo-American world, men are supposed to deal with facts, women with feelings (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In this culture boys choose games that allow them to compete and excel, girls choose games for the fun of being together and for not being left out (Tannen, 2013). In more 'feminine' cultures, gender differences are more 'blurred'. In Netherlands, for example, the research of (Hofstede et al., 2010) found no significant differences in goals that children seek in playing games.

(Tannen, 2013) describes gender differences in conversation in the Anglo-American world as:

- 'Report talk' – the way that men communicate both formally and informally, transferring information to establish and maintain status that displays their abilities and knowledge.
- 'Rapport talk' – the way that women communicate both formally and informally to build and maintain connections, first validating the relationship to build rapport and then dealing with any business.

Neither of these ways of communicating is necessarily superior to the other – this is just how men and women have been socialized. It also explains why there can be misunderstandings in both formal and informal conversations where men try to 'fix' the problem by giving advice and women want to talk about the problem without necessarily needing the advice the men are seeking to provide.

For project success communication must be planned and implemented, taking into account the various approaches and preferences of stakeholders influenced by their reality, personality, culture and gender.

Table 1- some comparisons between generations (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Zemke et al., 2013)

	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y (millenials)
Values	Growth/ expansion Team orientation Personal gratification	Self reliance Diversity and fun Balance: (work/life)	Optimism and confidence Achievement Sociability
Work ethic	“Go the extra mile” Good team players Uncomfortable with conflict	Casual approach to authority Distrustful of authority Inept at office politics	Tenacity and flexible Need supervision/structure Family more important than work
Leadership style	Consensus ‘Stewardship’ Participative management	Less attracted to leadership Egalitarian and altruistic Flexibility	Collaborative
Communication	One-on-one personal	Direct, as needed	Email, instant message.

4. Building communication strategies

We all communicate, consciously or unconsciously through words facial expressions, gestures and other actions: this is part of being human. Effective communication is more than putting data into templates and reports. The strategy for targeted communication depends on the type of communication, and consideration of the information needs of the stakeholder as well as of the project and project team.

The essential aspects of effective communication are:

- The type of communication and special tactics to ensure the information achieves its intended purpose
- Clarity on the purpose of the communication: defining the purpose.
- Refining the message through factoring in what is known about stakeholders such as their stake or interest, culture, personality and gender – personalizing the message.
- Ability to monitor and measure the effectiveness of the communication: ensuring that the planned communication is implemented and measuring the effectiveness of that communication, through application of *step 5 - monitoring*. Discussed earlier in this paper.

4.1. Types of stakeholder communication

There are three general classes of project communication: reporting, PR (project relations - marketing) and directed communication. Both reporting and PR are essential for project success, they are not the focus of this paper, so will just be mentioned briefly.

Reporting is the standard communication that provides information about the project. Even if the reports are never read, they provide reassurance that the project manager is well-organized, able to plan and implement the necessary project processes and practices and is also equipped to deal with the unexpected. These reports are usually mandated by the organization: they are not the subject of this paper.

Project relations (PR) or project marketing includes all of the broadcast communications needed to provide information about the project to the wider stakeholder community. Intelligent use of PR can result in far lower levels of apathy or opposition, and can increase support if only through the recognition factor that such a branding exercise provides.

Directed communication is focused on the important stakeholders (both positive and negative) identified through the 5-step process of the *Stakeholder Circle*, as needing information in addition to the regular reporting regime. Directed communication needs to be planned, to include the purpose of the communication, understanding of characteristics of the receiver, their expectations of the project outcomes may be relevant to achieving the best outcomes for the project. Some useful tactics include:

- WIFM – ‘what is in it for me’ – to align the needs of the project with the expectations of the stakeholder (or group).
- Involving other supportive stakeholders who are colleagues of the unsupportive stakeholder. Their advocacy for the work of the project and their assistance in delivering the message will be invaluable.
- Using networks to build peer pressure through the stakeholder’s network of contacts.
- Delivering information incrementally in a carefully planned way. Anecdotally, any message must be repeated at least three times for it to achieve its intended outcome.
- Making as much information as possible easily accessible, and using multiple channels to deliver the information.

Directed communication that is targeted to build a stronger relationships between the project and its stakeholder community provides the additional ‘fire-power’ needed to engage important stakeholders who are not engaged to the level necessary for project success.

4.2. Purpose of communication

When targeted communication is intended for senior stakeholders, it is essential to first state the purpose of the message. This signals that the project team recognizes that the stakeholder is ‘time poor’ and that by clearly stating the purpose they are helping to ready the recipient for the information that follow. The purpose of the communication can be:

- To ensure that the stakeholder has access to essential or useful information
- To reduce anxiety in change situations
- Giving bad news, providing negative or positive feedback
- Problem solving or issue resolution
- For individual or team motivation.

4.3. Personalizing the communication

When directed communication to improve the *attitude* of an important stakeholder is necessary, it will be more effective if personalized through adapting the message to the individual needs of the stakeholder. This adaptation factors the unique characteristics of the recipient and is intended to minimize misunderstandings. For example a senior manager from an Angle-American will probably require the information to be presented in a concise, direct manner in a format that enables swift understanding, such as graphics or financials. Whereas a stakeholder from an Arab or Latino culture will prefer a more indirect approach.

The application of the Aristotelian approach that considers a multi-focus approach to assist in personalizing the communication may be useful. It will allow the inclusion of all the data known about the stakeholder in a structured way. The three approaches are logos, ethos, and pathos.

- Logos: a logical focus on the questions:
 - *Why should the listener hear what you have to say? What you are going to say? How will you say it?*
 - *What is the problem, opportunity or perspective that you need to share with them?*
- Ethos: building credibility, providing evidence to support what you are saying.
- Pathos: connecting emotionally through relating to the needs of the audience with story-telling, particularly if the background of the recipient favours the indirect approach.

5. Conclusion

Communication is not a mechanical process of developing lists, gathering information and broadcasting project data. Effective communication and stakeholder engagement requires recognition that the subject of all the processes and lists are people – they cannot be categorized in the same way as inanimate objects. People make projects possible: they are done by people for the benefit of other people. Therefore effective relationships built and maintained through effective communication are essential for project success. Communication competence is recognizing that the project team must develop and implement communication strategies based on understanding the unique characteristics of their stakeholders and planning to factor these differences into any directed or targeted messages to engage their stakeholders more effectively. This is targeted communication.

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