



Communication for project managers

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Project managers tend to be strong on domain knowledge and add to this a discipline like Prince 2 either formally, or picked up from colleagues. If they come from a scientific or engineering discipline, this often leaves a bit of a gulf in their tool set in terms of soft skills.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that scientists can't communicate, but pointing out that communicating at a high level of competence is a skill that must be learned and practiced over time.

This paper sets out to establish some of the key areas which a project manager should be paying attention to and to provide a starting point for a very rewarding journey.

Communication skills for project managers.

In this context, I am offering a definition of communication that frames this paper and serves the needs of the audience I initially addressed with it. I define communication as:

“The art of exchanging views to establish common understanding and to recognise areas for further exploration.”

This definition differs in two ways from the standard type. It doesn't assume that all communication will be in words and doesn't assume that communication stops after a single exchange. The thing that often causes initial reaction is that I define communication as a two way exercise. Not just in the context of this paper, but in any context, I maintain that communication is always a two way exchange of ideas and there is no safe assumption as to which side will be influenced most.

A one way flow of noise can be described as communication simply because a few seeds must fall on fertile ground, though it needs to be understood that every communication has some effect and therefore all the unsuccessful communication in the latter example carries a high risk of causing an adverse affect.

Just to be crystal clear, a communication campaign might consist of sending one way streams of print or other media and then carrying out research to learn how effective it was. Though prolonged, this is no different to asking a question and listening to the answer.

Understanding your audience.

The greatest mistake any communicator can ever make is to underestimate his/her audience. The justifications go something like this: “I'm not launching a competitor to Windows, I'm just upgrading the accounts system”, or “ It's just three supervisors form the call centre, why do I need to fret over researching this audience, I'll just go in there and tell them”.

Well the latter example is close to my own heart because, despite not taking them lightly, I once missed one minor detail of screen design that resulted in threats of a strike and a four week delay in roll-out that was very embarrassing. If I had hovered and watched the “AS is” state of processes, and had I been sufficiently observant and questioning, I might just have avoided this embarrassment. The reason for pointing it out is to demonstrate that problems can arise anywhere any time as a result of poor communication.

Having defined communication earlier, I will now go on to make another rather profound declaration:

“The challenge of communication is to take an idea from one mind and translate it into sounds, pictures and feelings in another person's mind that lead them to a shared understanding.”

To reach a shared understanding with somebody, the easiest path is to walk a mile in their shoes. This is commonly described as empathy and there is no doubt about it's power. A tennis player

talking to another tennis player has an immediate advantage of respect and trust that others must take the time to earn. This is not necessarily any barrier as long as the reader recognises the need to do it.

Here are some of the strategies you can take to gain the trust and respect of your audience :

1. Influence the influencers. Just like a bowls player aims for the one at the front in the hope that it will knock down the others, so you can identify the subject's influencers and ask them to do your communication for you. The premise is that they already have the subject's respect and trust and therefore if you can convince them to deliver the message on your behalf, you can save some time and trouble.
For example, if you need to get a whole rugby team to buy your raffle tickets, you might ask the team captain to sell them for you. Much more productive if you can pull it off.
2. Share the subject's experience directly and honestly so that you see for yourself and prove your willingness to learn.
An example might be, leaving your suit at home one day and spending the day picking and packing in the warehouse so that you can fully understand their viewpoint.
3. Talk in depth with the subject and prove through repeating their messages back to them in your own words that that you have absorbed and understood what they have told you.
A valid example could be to read and discuss all the feedback you received to a written communication and then issue a follow up apologising for the areas where you were in error and demonstrating that you had listened and learned.
4. Organise focus groups to discuss issues and summarise the outcomes so that they can see a demonstration of your understanding

In addition to building respect and trust through empathy, there are other aspects of audience knowledge that are very important such as:

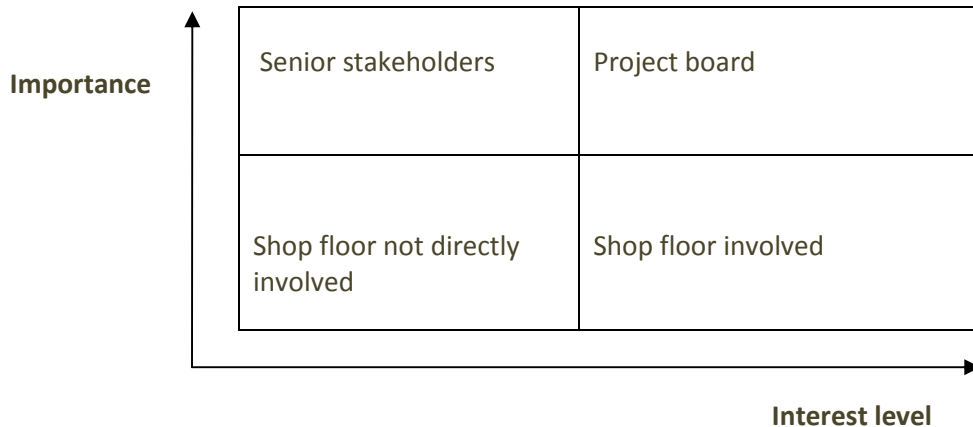
Find out when they are listening so you can time your messages. Home improvement companies like to catch you when you are relaxed on a Sunday at an event and your partner is also there to make the decision with you. HR departments tend to send global staff messages on Friday afternoon when they know full well that you are probably winding down and a bit relaxed and you may well read it. Don't try talking to the goods inwards staff when they have a line of trucks queued up for unloading, I promise you it won't work.

If your audience always read certain things, or always listen to certain things then this may be the way to reach them. I have found it necessary to hold lunchtime workshops with very high quality food and a glass or two of wine on offer, in order to get the attention of people I needed to engage. Some politicians meet people on yachts, it doesn't matter how you do it as long as it works and it's cost effective.

Decide how to segment your audience so that you channel the right communication to the right group. For example if you are about to implement a mobile phone driven order packing system, you will need to communicate regularly with the project board about budget and major issues, with the middle management about process and political issues and with the shop floor about any impacts they can expect on their jobs, security, prospects, comfort etc. Each segment will require a different

voice a different channel and a different type of message content, though in every other way. The principals will remain the same.

A classic communications matrix:



This matrix is a great starting place, but it is not enough and it makes a number of dangerous assumptions.

1. In reality it represents three segments in terms of voice and style, but four in terms of content, so it's really a three dimensional segmentation strategy.
2. It takes no account of the all important influencers.
3. Importance is invariably measured in terms of seniority in the organisation. All being equal, this would be a correct assumption, but in reality there will often be cases when the shop floor segments have more power to damage your project than the project board. The project board is supposed to be on your side after all.

“What you need to be doing with your communication plan is keeping your friends close and your enemies closer.”

Value propositions

These are all important concepts in any communication plan. A value proposition is a statement of the value that one party of an arrangement has to offer to others in that arrangement.

For example you might say that the project's value proposition to the Shop floor workers is that: a new automated scheduling system will save them having to fill in timesheets, give them a free mobile phone to take home with them and make their job more secure for the future.

The shop floor worker's value proposition to the project is that : he/she can co-operate to help test the system thoroughly ahead of launch so that it does not have any critical failings and help to support his/her companions when they are struggling to learn a new system.

Provided it proves correct and is accepted, this combination of value propositions makes up a win/win situation and you are headed for success. If you have put in the time and effort on understanding your audience, all this will be a doddle, but you still must never take your eye off the ball. Situations change and unrest can grow, so you need to keep an ear to the ground and stay in contact with your audience to make sure that messages are being well received and any problems are finding their way back to you quickly.

The right to speak

My explanation for this is very simple, we don't allow just anyone to get on a soapbox and expect a hearing. From childhood we have learned that we have to earn the right to speak and be heard and we demand this of others.

Before you have earned the right to speak to your audience you will have demonstrated knowledge of your audience, demonstrated knowledge of the subject matter and demonstrated the willingness and ability to listen, consider and learn before voicing opinions.

In achieving these things, you have not only earned the respect and the trust of your audience, but you have demonstrated that your point of view is worthy of an audience and you are now entitled to speak to them. Not all of this has to be achieved by you as an individual, but by you and your team, working as a team.

Ability to educate

I use the word educate because there is really no difference between teaching/learning and communication of any other sort. The challenge is to simplify that which is complex and to create easy hooks for the listener to file away the information and retrieve it randomly in future.

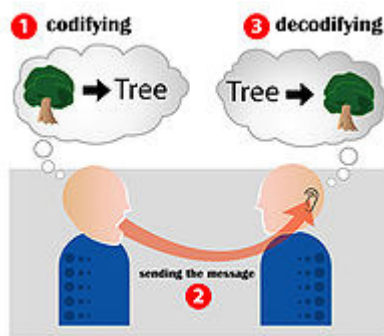
Understanding and respecting the ways in which people make sense of complexity and the way in which they remember and retrieve information is therefore the most valuable skill you can have available to you when you begin to deliver communication of any sort.

Communication styles

In terms of listening, I.E. awareness, as opposed to simply the part received via the ears, uses all the senses at once to varying degrees and applies filters based on past experience. First let us deal with the filters. These filters warrant a considerable discussion in their own right, both in terms of their ability to influence the outcome of communication and of the challenge of understanding them.

A great illustration of applying filters instinctively is the way in which any one of us and get in a car and drive a twenty mile journey noticing the sign that marked our destination and the one that said "vehicles over 6' wide should move to the left hand lane" and remaining blissfully unaware of as many as 30 signs per mile that we filtered out to the degree that we are not even aware of having seen them.

Filters are applied to all types of communications from sounds in our vicinity to headlines and adverts in exactly the same way and you can be absolutely sure that a similar filter will be applied to any communications that you send out. All you can do is to avoid using the more obvious triggers that might cause your communication to be classified along with the spam and superfluous messages.

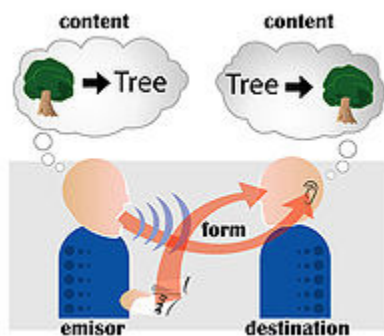


Appeal to the main senses

In general your communication will appeal to people to interpret in terms of mental pictures, sounds and gut feelings. These communication modes are sometimes described as Visual, Aural and Kinaesthetic modes. Each individual will have a dominant mode but everyone will use all of them to some degree. What this means is that some people immediately react to what they read by building a mental picture of some kind, others can hear a voice reading the text aloud as they read and others will feel a reaction of some sort that they can remember.

It is important therefore that you deliver your communication in a way that makes it easy for each type of communicator to deal with it.

E.G. A golf instructor might describe a swing as: “Moving the club smoothly in an elongated arc in time with the turning of your torso so that it feels as though the club is connected to your navel and you can hear a swoosh as the club head speeds up approaching the ball.”



That description won't make you into Tiger Woods, but it will be more helpful and make an impact on more people than; “ Swing the club back so that it hits the ball coming forward.”

It is not the content that is necessarily better but the fact that it appeals to different people in different ways and increases your chances of success by a factor of at least three.

Use analogy, comparison and association for new concepts

The majority of people use familiar concepts as parallels to help them with both understanding new concepts and remembering just about anything.

Associations

Advertisers have been using this method successfully for years. To tell an audience that your new notebook is of very high quality you might describe it as “The Rolls Royce of notebooks”. By drawing the parallel, you are automatically signalling the reader to associate your notebook with a very highly regarded product and by implication you are positioning your notebook at the top end of the market. Not only that, you are appealing to the readers instinctive means of remembering things, so

the filters are not working and the association will often be made subconsciously without ever questioning the product's credentials.

If you use this method for communicating new ideas to your audience you can influence the way they remember your message and even the feelings they have as they remember it, if you are able to make an association with something pleasant, or exciting. All of that is up to you.

Analogy

When it comes to understanding new concepts, analogy is very powerful if you can get it right. The majority of people switch off immediately when faced with understanding any form of complexity, so you won't get many chances to get it right. The key is to simplify it enough to keep them reading.

Explaining encryption levels in the browser can be done by drawing parallels to your security pass at work. In military establishments there are parts of the building where you can only go if you have a higher clearance, so if you need to go there you must ask for a new pass that allows you entry.

In the same way, if you want to be able to visit more secure websites with your browser, you need to configure its security to allow you access.

This analogy takes a complex and boring aspect of web browsers, guaranteed to switch most people off instantly and makes it easy to understand and not at all intimidating.

If it were really important I might have drawn the parallel with James Bond to associate it with glamour and then added some mental pictures, sounds and feelings and turned browser security into a glamorous and memorable subject.

Comparison

Big, small, good, bad are understood only in the reader's mind and exist only in relation to something else. If you want your reader to believe something is very small then compare it to something familiar. E.G. For all its computing power, you can fit 24 of these in a typical laptop carry bag, or slip it into your coat pocket when going out.

This type of explanation makes an immediate impact on the reader and creates a picture to hang on to.

Quality control in communications

The smart way to create winning messages is to test your message on a small number before you give it wider exposure, gradually making improvements as you learn.

For example, you might pull a few knowledgeable people aside to view your presentation ahead of a conference, then having followed their advice, you might find a small subset of the expected audience to test it on. This way you are dramatically improving your chances of success.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of communication is the reaction it gets from its audience. To understand how effective your communication is, you must measure the response to it.

If your communication is intended to stop people smoking, then there's no point in asking people if they liked it. Maybe it upsets 80% of readers and stops 20% from smoking, that would be a great result.

Of course you will sometimes need to know people's opinions, but this should always be driven by a need to know how you can improve the outcomes. E.G. If your stop smoking message is not stopping

enough people you may ask whether it is being read at all and whether it is reaching the right people etc. These questions are valid in the context of improving results only.

What this message is saying to you is, don't create one draft and expect the world to fall at your feet. Do your research and then keep testing and keep making improvements.

Staying in touch

Sometimes a message gets through but doesn't have an effect until later, other times it strikes a chord, but it is not timely and action is postponed and then forgotten. Most of us read interesting stuff every day and file it away somewhere intending to return to it. Even if we remember it usually we can't find it. For this reason it is important to repeat important messages at intervals in order to remind your readers who have forgotten and to provide a second chance for those who may have lost it.

Regular communications can be very acceptable provided they are consistent, relevant and not intrusive, so it is a great idea to establish a regular communication with people you need to stay in touch with and to include links to previous communication as well as possibly short summaries or new viewpoints.

In a long project involving a very broad range of stakeholders it may be useful to release something monthly that updates people on progress and gives them a source of information that they can refer back to. Managing a repository of information with old presentations and other communications available is another great way to maintain a communications link.

In summary

In just a few short pages, we have raced through some very important concepts in terms of communication. I sincerely hope that you found at least one idea in there that you can take action on to improve the outcomes of your communications activities. If there were concepts that you were intrigued by, but needed more time with then do set aside the time to read and study and form a final opinion that you can act upon.

The main points of the paper were:

1. Communication is a two way exchange of ideas. In an ideal world, both parties need to approach it as an opportunity to learn something useful.
2. Empathy with your audience is the greatest tool you can have available to you and it generally makes point number one a certainty.
3. Use that empathy to deliver your messages in a way that will get past the filters and strike a chord through intelligent use of analogy, comparison, words, pictures and feelings.
4. Keep listening, learning and adjusting your approach
5. Communication works best as part of a relationship rather than a one off encounter.

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