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The Contribution of Communication to IT Project Success
by Ann Pilkington
Commentary

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There is a specific set of communication challenges that come with an IT led change project. Not least among them is the lack of resources so often put into the communication function. When millions are being spent on hardware and software, it is a false economy to assume that the project manager or a non-communication specialist can take it on. The project manager should be over-seeing, not doing communication and why would someone without the relevant experience and/or qualification be suitable for the role? What project manager would put a communicator in charge of user acceptance testing? Exactly! So why is it acceptable to put a non-communicator in charge of communication?

So aside from the right person for the role, what are the communication challenges for IT projects? Here are my top three:

Overselling: communicators themselves can be guilty of this. It goes with an approach to change communication that is all about "selling" the change. This sell approach pervades through much project communication and is flawed for a number of reasons. Firstly, stakeholders are often cynical and don't believe the "puffery". This results from a history of IT projects that have failed to deliver what they promised. There is a great model that helps explain this:
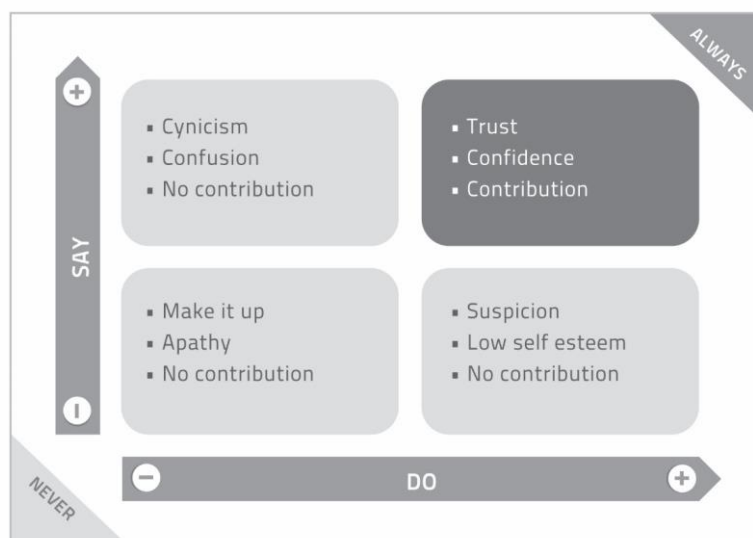

Fig 1 Adapted from Harkins, P. 1999 *Powerful Conversations: How high impact leaders communicate.*
McGraw Hill

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When stakeholders feel this way, no amount of selling is going to get them excited. Only when they see the project delivering what it said it promised and benefits accruing will they start to be convinced. Secondly, projects set out on a relentless quest for positivity. How many project stakeholder maps and plans cite "being positive about the project" as the required outcome for the engagement activity? Quite a lot in my experience.

It's much more effective to set a tangible outcome for the engagement. Ask what the stakeholder wants from your project, but also what you want from that stakeholder. Having everyone love your project would be great, but striving for it leads to a lot of unfocussed effort and doesn't necessarily help to realise benefits. And how do you measure that positivity anyway? It is perfectly possible for stakeholders to be a bit sceptical but still willing to help the project succeed, as long as they know what is needed of them.

Thirdly it's an approach that can act as a blocker to effective communication within an organisation. While employees like to hear about strategic direction from the senior leadership team (Ruck, 2015) it is often middle or line managers that have to make the change real for their teams. Having to sell a message when employees are cynical or there isn't any perceived benefit for them is a tough ask and it's no wonder line managers would rather not bother. However, facilitating a conversation about the change, gathering feedback that is listened to and acted on is a less threatening task – provided the feedback mechanisms are in place to support managers.

Ambiguity: every project has an element of ambiguity. To repeat that famous quote from Donald Rumsfeld there are "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns" and as he said, it is the latter category that includes the difficult ones. He won a Plain English "Foot in mouth" award for what he said, but actually most of us probably know what he meant. Sometimes it feels a bit the same with IT projects. There are decisions yet to be made that will impact on stakeholders, the impacts are unknown but we do know that there will be an impact. However, there are also sometimes things that come completely out of the blue. It means a lot of ambiguity for stakeholders and some are better at handling that than others. It also means there are times in the project lifecycle when we just don't have the information that people want. A common tactic in this scenario is to find something to say – anything – just to fill the void on the basis that some communication is better than none. In fact, this can be harmful. People don't want irrelevant communication or to be told the same thing over and over again – what they want is an answer to their question.

Sometimes projects have to be brave enough to not communicate. The alternative is a lot of noise that stops other important messages getting through. Of course, it isn't as simple as just saying nothing – that would be a bad idea. Instead what the project must do is signpost. This means explaining why there isn't an answer, the process that is in place to reach it and the timescales. It's essential to go back to stakeholders on time of course , even if that might be explain a delay and meanwhile it might be fine to just say nothing and simply ensure that the most accurate and up to date information is available for reference on an intranet, SharePoint site or similar.

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Handover and closure: benefits may be realised during the lifecycle of a project or programme, but usually the project lifecycle shows them being realised post-handover and closure. There is an issue here because while the sponsor who has ultimate responsibility for the project will remain, the project structure and associated communication support is gone.

Effective handover to business as usual is essential. Unfortunately, often as projects draw to a close funds are tight and communication may be let go without adequate handover.

There needs to be a transition phase when whoever is going to be responsible for communication in the business as usual setting gets to really understand what the project was aiming to achieve and how they support the sponsor to help this happen. Simply throwing the change over the wall and hoping for the best while the project team moves on to the next opportunity is never going to lead to success.

Reference

http://www.instituteforpr.org/challenge-wisdom-lets-hear-top/

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Information about Ann's book, *Communicating Projects, An End-to-End Guide to Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Effective Communication,* can be found here and at http://www.gowerpublishing.com/isbn/9781409453192.

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