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*Processes Aren't the Problem – Communication is the Culprit*
by Allia DeAngelis
Advisory Article

# Processes Aren't the Problem — Communication is the Culprit

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## Introduction

Despite the increasing number of tools and resources available to businesses, data consistently show that projects continue to fail at an alarming rate. To mitigate failure, businesses are continually trying new project tools and processes. However, these don't actually address the real problems but are merely a solution for some surface-level symptoms. To overcome what the real underlying challenges are, project managers need to get to the root of the issues.

This approach should come as no surprise, as the first axiom of the Agile Manifesto is "Individuals and interactions over processes and tools." Project managers have long understood that tools can never drive the right process and that processes can never take care of your teams. All tools and processes can do is give a focus to the work so projects can move forward. The actual drive and success of the project depend on the people.

If you find your projects or teams are consistently facing roadblock after roadblock, it's likely there is a leadership and conversation issue. If you cannot have an open and honest conversation about what is holding the team or project back, then it doesn't really matter which process you adopt. A team that functions well, communicates clearly and is led by an emotionally intelligent manager can easily use any process to succeed.

To keep your projects moving forward toward a successful outcome, it's imperative that you facilitate critical conversations so you can fix the underlying issues that are holding your team back so they can reach success — regardless of the process you use. Here are some suggestions for how you can get your teams communicating:

## Get to the root of the problems

Before your team can really make progress on any project, you all must confront the elephants in the room. These elephants are any reality or truth you or your team don't want to address and are impeding the progress of your project.

Is there someone on the team who isn't doing the work you need them to do? Is the team lead not giving the team the help it needs? Do you need to get some perspective and rethink how you're approaching the project?

Be sure the team feels comfortable being completely honest. Fear impedes creativity and that can hold back your team from doing its best work. If people feel comfortable being honest, they will open up. Discussing issues openly will help you uncover what may be keeping the team from completing the project successfully.

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The best way to ensure these critical conversations happen is to set up a regular time and place to collaborate on what is working well and what isn't.

## Remain impartial when issues are voiced

As the person leading the conversation, it's crucial that you remain as neutral as possible regarding what the team brings up. In my experience with leading these discussions, I have acted as if someone was telling me a secret and they needed to share it with me and the group. This approach keeps me inquisitive, rather than leading me to become defensive, emotional or to take sides.

It's also critical to make sure the issue isn't treated personally not only for yourself but also for the group. You can do this by asking questions like, "Do we want to handle this problem?", "Do we want to deal with it later?" or "Are we the best group to solve this issue?" By removing emotions (as much as is possible), this will give everyone an opportunity to approach the problem from different perspectives.

Along with depersonalizing and remaining neutral, it is also important that you reward the group for speaking up about issues. You can do this by saying things like, "That is a pivotal issue you just brought up. What can we do to address it?" Responding positively when your team opens up will encourage others to follow suit. The more open everyone is, the easier it will be to successfully complete any project you take on.

## Understand your own biases

Although being impartial is the ideal, it is nearly impossible to be completely unbiased. We're only human and we all have our own biases. To counteract these biases, take time before going into a meeting to evaluate if you are in a place to hear and respond to the kind of issues your team may need to bring up.

You must understand what preconceived notions you're bringing to the table before you can understand what the members of your team are bringing themselves. Are you open to being receptive to what they need to share? Are you present in the moment or are you distracted or upset by something else? Do you have time to set aside to listen?

If you aren't prepared to be receptive to the truth your team might speak, find a way to get yourself to a place where you can be open and receptive. If you need to, push back the meeting. It's equally important that you be *ready* to hear the truth as it is to actually having the conversation.

## Conclusion

We can no longer expect our projects to succeed by sitting back and hoping that process and tools will take care of everything. As project managers, we need to be leaders who not only ensure projects are supervised, but who also serve as change managers and servant leaders. The real secret in our project world today is that if you encourage and allow people to be their best, they will go beyond your expectations and surprise you with what they can do.

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For example, at my company we recently created a new mobile application for contact centers. Before working on this project together, only two people on the team even knew each other — let alone had worked together. Communication and trust is imperative in situations like these, as having too little of either can get in the way, affecting project quality and causing timelines to suffer. Fortunately, in this situation managers fostered and encouraged hard discussions by helping us understand and resolve our different perspectives when we weren't able to do so on our own. This leadership allowed the team to work together successfully to quickly develop and launch an outstanding new product.

By focusing first on people and communication, you can revolutionize how your teams operate. You will work more efficiently, which will give you the ability to make the changes your business needs to stay ahead of the curve and remain relevant in an ever-changing market.

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**Allia DeAngelis** is a senior program manager at inContact, where she runs cross-functional initiatives and communication across disparate corporate groups and departments. As a Certified Scrum Master with the Agile Alliance, Allia has more than 13 years' experience driving engineering team communication. She is also a member of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.  Allia can be contacted at allia.deangelis@incontact.com.