

# Communicating Projects<sup>1</sup>

## Series Introduction

*By Ann Pilkington*

Nobody would argue that good communication is essential for project success, but what does good communication look like?

During the coming months I aim to challenge a few common perceptions about communication, explain why communication on projects is different and set out what good communication looks like.

One of the things that really frustrates me is the notion that communication is a “soft skill”. It’s one of the perceptions that I am going to be challenging. Good communication is grounded in research, sets outcome objectives and provides evidence of its success – that’s actually quite hard!

I’m a communicator, not a project manager, but I have tremendous respect and enthusiasm (yes really!) for the project management discipline. It’s why I put pen to paper, so to speak, to write a book on topic – *Communicating Projects* – published by Gower.

Those of us in the world of PR and communication can benefit hugely from an understanding of project methodology and I hope to show how project managers can benefit and learn from commissioning good communication. But commissioning it requires an understanding of it and that is what we are going to be developing during the months ahead.

So, what will I be covering?

I want to start by thinking differently about communication. Projects by their very nature are about change and that calls for a particular approach to communication. Rather than “selling” the change and endeavouring to get every stakeholder being positive, let’s think about how we engage people in a genuine two way dialogue. It isn’t enough to just sell the benefits. People may rationally agree with the benefits case but if they have underlying worries – for example, security of their data in an IT change, whether or not that fear is justified, they still won’t be convinced.

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<sup>1</sup> This series of articles on effective project communications is by Ann Pilkington, founding director of the PR Academy (UK) and author of the book *Communicating Projects* published by Gower in 2013. Ann is one of the UK’s leading experts on communications; she shares her knowledge with project managers and teams around the world in this series in the *PM World Journal*. Her author profile can be found at the end of this article.

As a project manager, commissioning good communication is also about knowing how to get the best from your communication manager. What should you expect? How can you make it a mutually rewarding relationship for the benefit of the project? Communication people can sometimes seem a bit annoying; we ask difficult questions and may challenge the project or what we are being asked to do. I will be discussing why project managers should embrace this and may find their communication lead ends up a best friend.

I said earlier that good communication is grounded in research; it is also grounded in theory. A lot of damage can be done by not understanding human behaviour and how we respond to communication messages. It isn't as straightforward as we like to think. That George Bernard Shaw quote about the problem with communication being "illusion that it has been accomplished" is often repeated but how far do projects take that message on board when designing communication strategies?

Coupled with some robust measurement and evaluation, it is knowledge that can make us realise that much of our communication may not be working. The growing realisation of the importance of communication has, in some cases, led to over communication. This growing noise just makes it harder for messages to get through with the result that we tend to shout even louder. No wonder stakeholders tune out and projects are left frustrated and baffled as to why nobody seems to read anything that is sent out. It doesn't need to be this way!

Projects include risk; it's one of the first things that we learn. Hopefully that risk stays on the log and simply fades away but when it doesn't and morphs into a full blown issue or crisis, it is often the time when the value of communication really comes to the fore. We can probably all think of organisations that handled a crisis badly (BP anyone?) but subsequently went into over drive in terms of getting their stakeholder relationships and communication management right. There are some simple rules and established practices that projects can draw on so that should the worse happen, the crisis doesn't become a drama.

These are just some of the topics that I will set out to explore during the coming weeks. If there is an aspect of communication that has always interested you, or maybe baffled you, why not get in touch via Twitter and we can see if it is something to explore @AcademyAnn.

## About the Author



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**Ann Pilkington** is the author of *Communicating Projects* published by Gower in 2013. She is a founding director of the PR Academy which provides qualifications, training and consultancy in all aspects of communication including change project communication and project management.

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

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