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Why it's time to ditch "what's in it for me"
Communicating Projects
Series Article 2   by Ann Pilkington

Communicating Projects[1]

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By Ann Pilkington

It hear it all the time when discussing change communication. "You have to answer the 'what's in it for me' question," people say.

The problem with that question is that it implies that there *is* something in for the stakeholder and let's be honest, sometimes there just isn't.

This focus on positivity can also be a blocker for those managing stakeholder engagement. It was brought home to me when I was working with a team in a Government organisation that was about to go through a period of change. The conversation with the leadership team around the communication approach was halted when one of them stated that they "couldn't possibly sell this to their team". It made me realise that this is what managers and leaders in the organisation thought they had to do – make everyone feel positive about what was going to happen.

Ultimately of course, we would want stakeholder to feel positive but this isn't a mood that can be created simply by trying to "sell" a message.

Thinking positively about a change and the organisation that is delivering it is more likely to come about through the following:

- Accurate information
- Timely information
- Genuine two-way dialogue.

So, let's think about each of those in turn.

Accuracy

Accurate information sounds easy but in times of change can be hard to achieve. It isn't that people don't want to tell the truth, but that truth can change. Complex programmes and projects will shift in terms of scope and timing. The challenge for the communicator is keep up with the changes and make sure that those who need to know are kept informed. If you are a project manager, check that you have your communication lead in the change request process so that he or she has early site of changes and can comment from a communication perspective. Importantly, it also means that the communication message and activity can be prepared.

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[1] This series of articles on effective stakeholder engagement 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 in this series of articles in the *PM World Journal*. Her author profile can be found at the end of this article.

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A failure to do this can result in suspicion and cynicism among stakeholders. I like the "Say Do" matrix and use it a lot to help projects understand why communication matters and particularly why it is important to keep people up to date when things change.
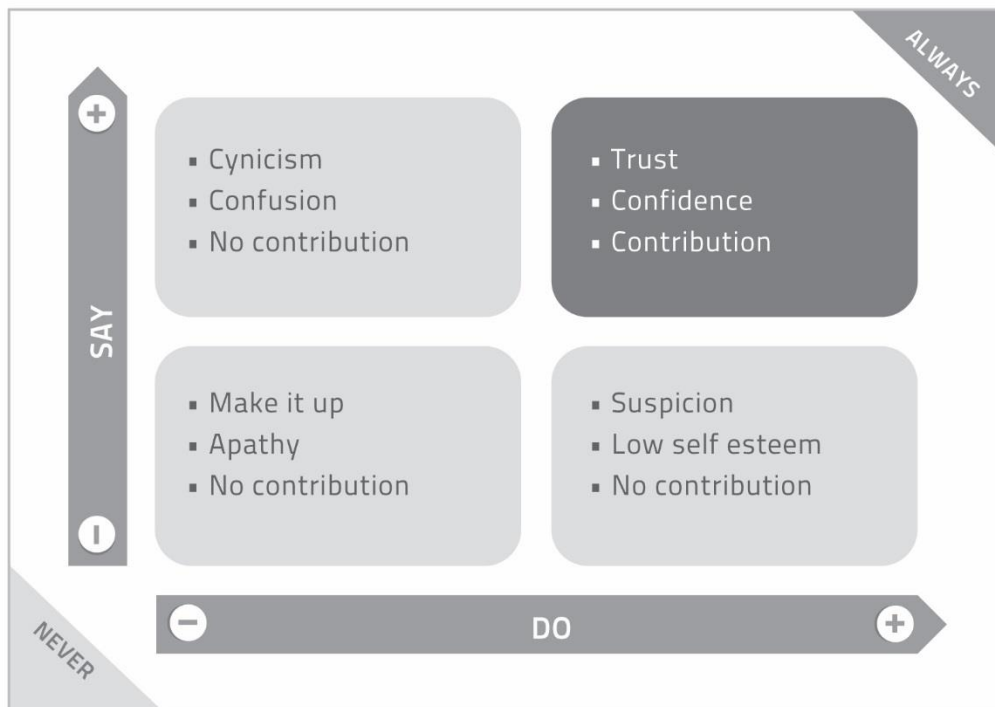
Adapted from Harkins, P. 1999 Powerful Conversations: How high impact leaders communicate. McGraw Hill

To the importance of accuracy, I would also add relevant. There can be a tendency to want to talk about what matters to the project which may be completely different to what matters to a stakeholder. The things that matter to a stakeholder can seem inconsequential but the project ignores them at its peril. The aim is to be able to walk in the shoes of the stakeholder. This may mean getting out and asking them what matters to them. Note the difference: what matters to them, not what is in it for them. It is not until these concerns are addressed that a stakeholder will be open to messages about benefits.

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Timely

Timeliness is something that I will touch on throughout this series because this is something that it is easy to get wrong. We aren't helped by the fact that alongside the supposed importance of "what's in it for me", we have the myth that one must communicate early and often.

It may seem counter intuitive in an article about communicating projects to suggest that we should communicate less (this is something else you will hear me repeat during the series!). The risk is that if we communicate when something isn't relevant, our stakeholders will disengage and learn not to read our communications because they don't seem relevant at that time. Of course this doesn't mean that we say nothing but the danger of starting "broadcast" communication too early is that we then feel duty bound to fill the void when there really is nothing to say. If we do this, we are just creating noise. Sometimes it is OK to be brave and tell stakeholders that they won't hear anything for a while, but make sure they know where to find you if they need something.

Genuine two-way dialogue

A conversation is by its very nature two-way isn't it? Well, yes, but here I am talking about taking it one step further. Genuine two-way dialogue is a conversation but the key is that both sides are willing to adapt their position in a bid to reach mutual understanding.

This can be tough on projects because a change or increase in scope is probably the last thing a busy project manager needs. Ideally this level of dialogue will have happened at prior to project kick off so that stakeholder views have already been taken on board, but the reality is often different.

Listening to feedback does not necessarily have to mean taking it on board and making a change – of course it is great if the project can do this, but sometimes it simply isn't feasible. It is in this scenario that the quest for a positive view of the project can act as a blocker to the sort of dialogue that needs to happen. Having to say "no" to a stakeholder isn't easy so sometimes it seems easier not to engage at all. However, I would argue that the very action of listening, taking feedback seriously, considering it and having the courtesy to explain why something can't happen, is more likely to result in a positive stakeholder than any amount of "sell" messaging.

So, for your next project, think about answering the "what does it mean to me?" question and put "what does it mean to me" to bed once and for all. Let's design our stakeholder engagement strategies around the three themes of accuracy, timeliness and two-way dialogue; we may just get the positivity we seek!

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Ann Pilkington is the author of *Communicating Projects* published by Gower. 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 here and at http://www.gowerpublishing.com/isbn/9781409453192.

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