

## Communicating Projects<sup>1</sup>

### **Getting the most from your project communicator**

*By Ann Pilkington*

As a project manager your role isn't to do everything yourself (although maybe it sometimes seems that way!) but to ensure that you have the right specialists to help the project hit its milestones and achieve its benefits.

On larger projects you may have the benefit of full time communication lead, or you may have someone from a corporate communication team supporting you as and when needed. There is no best approach. A full time resource can really get to know the project, be an active member of the project team. But the support from corporate or organisation communication can bring with it the benefit of an overview across numerous projects resulting in synergies and less chance of communication clashes. Either way, how do you get the best from your communication lead? Here are some pointers:

Get communication involved from the very start – if possible before the project is even formed. It is a tremendous help for the communicator to understand the thinking and it can be hard to make this up later. Communicators can also help to shape the project as they often bring an understanding of what is happening in the external environment and what is on stakeholder agendas.

Ask your communicator to come up with the solution. One thing that really bugs the communicator is being brought a solution rather than the problem. Communication is most effective when the solution is designed once the problem is understood fully. Sometimes the answer may not even be a communication intervention. Good communicators have a range of tools in their toolkit and should be able to select the most appropriate. So, seek their advice and counsel and don't be surprised if they ask "why?" a lot!

Good communication should be measurable – it isn't a mysterious "soft skill". It should be based around objectives that the project helps to shape and signs up to. As a project manager, take time to discuss and agree the communication strategy objectives. Ensure that they are relevant, measurable and – most important of all – focussed on outcomes not outputs. Having an objective to deliver a number of events or quantity of briefings is useful, but you need to know that they have achieved the outcome you need to help your project succeed. Leading on from objectives and measurement, there needs to be a forum for your communication lead to give visibility to the strategy and what is being achieved so ensure that the communication function is represented at your project board. Please avoid making

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<sup>1</sup> This series of articles on effective project communication 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.

communication the last item on the agenda, it happens a lot and then everyone wants to rush through it because they are heading for a train or lunch!

As well as having communication as a standalone item, integrate communication into your project board agenda. For every item ask “what are the implications for communication?” It may well be that there isn’t a communication need and that’s fine, but it is important to ask the question.

See if you can integrate this question into project documentation as well as at board meetings. When communication resource is scarce and an organisation is dealing with multiple changes and projects it can be helpful to have a methodology for deciding when to involve a professional communicator. As a rule of thumb, ask how many people will be affected by what is happening and how high is the impact. Mapping changes in this way can help to decide the approach too. So, for example, if a change is going to affect a lot of people but the change isn’t significant, simple channels such as an intranet news item may be sufficient. If the change is significant but only relevant to a few people, it might be easiest to pick up the phone or pop along to their team meeting or other event. When there is a significant change that affects a lot of people, then you definitely need your professional communicator on board to develop a communication approach and take charge of delivery. What an exercise like this shows us is that communication is never a “one size fits all” thing.

Expect your communication lead to facilitate a two-way dialogue with stakeholders. The most effective communication is genuinely two-way, i.e. a conversation that can lead to either side adapting what they do. This needs thoughtful planning and facilitation and your communication lead is there to help with this.

Involve your communication lead in risk work. Communicators can bring a valuable perspective on risk and will be the ones who think about reputation risk to the wider organisation – not just to the delivery of the project. They will understand how the media works and how something that could seem inconsequential to a project could be fodder for a less than flattering media story. They can be a valuable ally should things go wrong and you find a corporate press office involved, your communication lead can help to manage this relationship for you.

Finally, select your communication lead with care. Communication is a skilled occupation with a body of knowledge that underpins it. Yes, we all communicate every day, but that is very different to managing communication on a change project. Look for someone with a professional qualification in communication (and remember, that’s different to marketing). On a smaller project you will want someone who can think strategically but can also do the tactical delivery.

Communication on projects is a strategic function that can sometimes make the difference between success and failure to realise benefits – it’s about a lot more than the project S.O.S (Sending Out Stuff!).

## About the Author



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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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