

Communicating Projects¹

What does good communication look like?

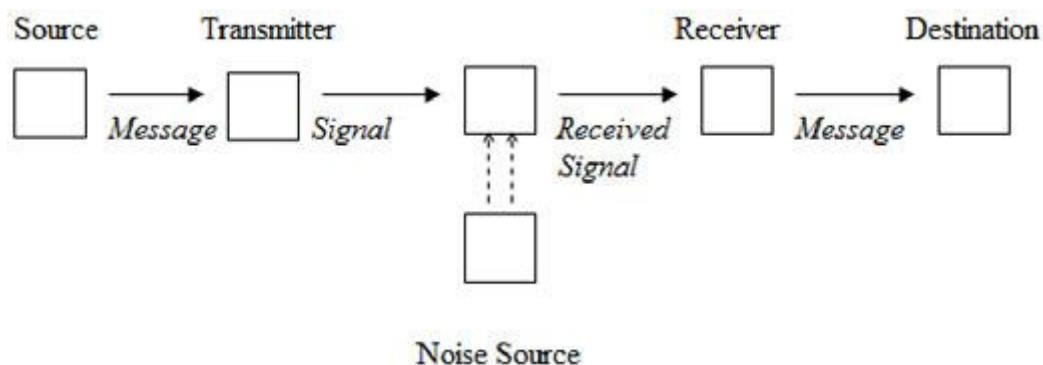
By Ann Pilkington

One of the things that I often hear from fellow communicators is how everyone thinks that they can do communication. Of course we all communicate every day and sometimes more effectively than others. However, this doesn't mean that everyone understands the best way to communicate within a project or organisation.

The George Bernard Shaw quote – “the biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished” is well worn now, but how many people really understand what that means and use that understanding to inform how they communicate?

What this saying should make us think is two things: what is the best way to communicate and how will I know if it has worked?

An exercise that I love to do with my communication students is to construct a model of communication. We start with the Shannon and Weaver 1946 model which is basic and linear and doesn't really reflect the complexity of human communication. Perhaps this isn't surprising given that these two guys were telephone engineers!



Shannon and Weaver 1946 linear model of communication

When we do this exercise we add in factors such as:

- The receiver's perception of the sender
- Culture, both national and local culture within the organisation
- The “world view” of the receiver

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.

- The perception of the channel that the message is sent over.

There are lots of other things that influence the way that a communication is received and interpreted. I am sure that everyone will agree with this but it is surprising that despite this, a lot of project and organisation communication works on the basis that once a message has been sent, the assumption is that it has been received and interpreted as intended.

Let's take each of these influences in turn:

The receiver's perception of the sender: how credible is the person sending the message? This might be the project manager or perhaps the sponsor. Perloff (2008 p222-4) argues that there are three factors that position someone as a credible communicator:

- Expertise – the belief that the communicator has special skills or know how
- Trustworthiness – the communicator's perceived honesty and character
- Goodwill – communicators who display goodwill convey that they have listeners' interests at heart, show understanding of the ideas of others and are empathetic.

It is worth considering how these attributes in your project spokesperson can be brought forward which in turn will help with future communication activity.

Culture: those working in international organisations will be accurately aware of the difference in culture across countries, but different cultures exist within the same organisation. It is important for communication to reflect this. It is easy sitting centrally as part of a project to craft what seems to be clear communication, but if local culture is not considered the message may be lost. Writing in the *Journal of Communication Management* (1999 Vol 4, No. 3) Daymon points out that in reality communication strategies often lead to misunderstandings and even resistance in the workplace — despite strategies grounded in principles of 'excellent' communication. She asks why it is that tailored and targeted messages, flowing via symmetrical communication routes (i.e. where there are opportunities for feedback) still fail to achieve organisational goals of cooperation and unity?

Daymon argues that it is insufficient to view communication as a method, a message or a strategy and instead account also needs to be taken of the broader cultural context in which managed communication takes place because this sensitises managers to issues such as how and why employees misinterpret, resist or reject management messages.

So how can a project achieve this? A very effective way is to work with local contacts to test and refine communication messages and activities. These might be local change champions who are already in place or a network could be set up specifically to support project communication. Think about the testing that goes on in marketing to refine campaign messages, and even new movies are screened in front of test audiences – our project comms should be just the same!

The world view of the receiver: this is similar to culture but is really more specific to the individual. Messages will be received through a lens which can be shaped by any number of things. For example, previous experience, political or religious views. Imagine an employee stakeholder who feels that the organisation has treated them badly before; he or she may be understandably cynical about what the project is delivering. This illustrates the importance of using face to face communication where there is the opportunity for the stakeholder to give feedback and enter into a dialogue. In this way concerns can be discussed and negative perceptions addressed. Of course turning a negative stakeholder into a positive one doesn't happen overnight and sometimes we may have to accept that whatever we do our stakeholder will not change his or her view.

Perception of the channel: have you ever ended a relationship by text message? OK, that's a bit flippant but my point is that ending a relationship by text message rather than sitting the other person down and talking face to face screams disrespect. So, the way that the message is delivered actually becomes part of the message.

This is important understanding within organisations. Think about the perception of the channels that are being used. If the in-house magazine is viewed as management propaganda, then that perception will be applied to the stories within it. Think too about when there are important and sensitive announcements to make – for example, job losses. Not only does the channel become part of the message, but the channel must be appropriate for the message. I worked on a large change programme and when I arrived I found that someone had simply put a story on the intranet to announce the programme and let everyone know that 1500 administrative jobs were to go. It took us quite a while to recover from that.

In summary, project communication is difficult. Not everyone can do it and never call it a soft skill!

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](https://www.routledge.com/Communicating-Projects-An-End-to-End-Guide-to-Planning-Implementing-and-Evaluating-Effective-Communication), published by Gower in 2013, can be found at <https://www.routledge.com/Communicating-Projects-An-End-to-End-Guide-to-Planning-Implementing-and-Pilkington/p/book/9781409453192>

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