

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

### **Brexit, Football and Project Communications**

*By Ann Pilkington*

Here in the UK Europe is dominating the news agenda and many peoples' social media feeds. First, a referendum resulted in a vote to leave the European Union and then England crashed out of the Euro 2016 football tournament in spectacular style. Northern Ireland are out too, but with their heads held high and as I write, Wales is still in.

There are lessons to be learned from both exits.

There were two official campaigns in the referendum – leave or remain. The polls showed that it was always going to be close, but many people were still surprised when the leave camp won.

The usual adage is that people don't like change. The first time there was a referendum on the EU back in the 1970s there was a bit of a to-do because the wording on the ballot paper was felt to be leading – it asked people if they wanted to “stay” in the European Community with just a yes or no answer. At that time 67% of people voted to stay. Well people certainly decided to embrace change this time around. So, what does that tell us about communicating change?

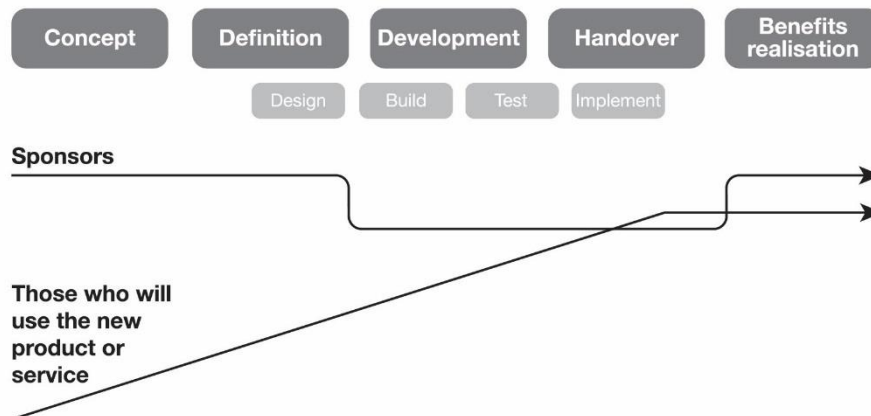
I have never really believed that people don't like change. There are some changes that people don't like of course but others can be very well received. The idea that all change is bad and people are going to react negatively to it influences a lot of project communication. We go into it expecting trouble and trying to “sell” the change instead of concentrating on engaging stakeholders. [I wrote about this in April](#). Engagement means giving stakeholders a voice, but also ensuring that it is an “informed voice”. It is hard for stakeholders to make a contribution when they don't really understand what they are being asked to comment on.

One of the biggest cries that we heard during the run up to the referendum was that people didn't have enough information. Where were the facts? Of course, providing the facts isn't always as easy as it sounds. Neither side could really say for sure what would happen if their view prevailed. Dealing with this level of ambiguity was difficult for many; they felt that they couldn't make a decision about which way to vote. Unfortunately ambiguity is a feature of many change projects in the early phases. However, change projects have an advantage over the UK referendum in that they usually have a clear version of what things will look like post implementation. The ambiguity comes in being able to explain exactly

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

how that will happen and when – this is hard in the early days. This is why, along with Lou Horton, I developed a [new stakeholder model](#) which maps stakeholders to different project stages and acknowledges the challenge of ambiguity.



Although I believe that change is as likely to be welcomed as feared, coming out of the EU was a huge decision and I thought that even though it was close, the vote would be to remain due to a fear of the unknown. The remain camp had a strong message around the economy. The same messaging had seen the Conservative Party in the UK win a Parliamentary majority at the most recent election – surprising even them! And the state of the Stock Market and Sterling post the vote has left many thinking they were right. So why didn't it resonate this time?

The leave camp led a lot on immigration and spoke about how the money that gets sent to Europe would instead be spent on the National Health Service (there has subsequently been some back tracking on this). The spokesman for the UK Independence Party – who wasn't a member of the official leave campaign – said on many occasions that membership of the EU and the associated free movement of people stopped young people in the UK getting on the housing ladder. The NHS and housing are hot issues in the UK.

The two approaches couldn't be more different in my view. The leave campaign spoke to emotions. The remain camp spoke to the head. Remain talked a lot about the economy, but this is quite an abstract concept for many. For those on low incomes who have seen their towns depressed by the demise of manufacturing and lack of alternative work, the economy can be seen as being about big business with little or no connection to ordinary lives. The remain camp failed to make this connection; they failed to make it real for many people.

The remain strategy was branded "project fear". It was a strategy that was felt to have worked in the recent referendum to decide if Scotland should become an independent country. It didn't work this time.

Expert after expert came out for remain but again it didn't make any difference. In fact in my opinion it only served to entrench the views of leave voters.

I must say that I was surprised that the remain camp didn't flex its messaging – I concluded that they must be testing it with voters and finding that the messages were indeed resonating. I am sure this testing was happening but perhaps the issue was who the testing was with?

So what learning is there here for project communications? One of the clues here is that this fear strategy had worked before in the Scottish referendum so why shouldn't it work this time? I am reminded of the wise words of Mary McKinlay Vice President of the International Project Management Association. Mary teaches project management with me and one of the things she always cautions is that every project is unique. You have different people, you are in different times. Never think that because something worked on a previous project it will work the same on the next one. This is as true of project communication as it is for any other aspect of project management. Of course it is important to bring learning and ideas from before, but every project must be approached with a fresh pair of eyes. Find out what the stakeholders think, what is worrying them? Just because they behaved in a certain way before doesn't mean that they will do so again.

So, what of the football? What can we learn from England's embarrassing 2-1 defeat to Iceland? The England manager resigned almost before the teams had swapped shirts. Pundits said that there was no passion and no game plan. England has some great players; apparently Iceland doesn't even have a professional league. As they arrived back at their French base one UK TV station stated: "England's multi million pound players arrive back at their luxury hotel". Ouch!

So what must the new manager do? Quite a lot it seems but one challenge will be making a lot of individual talents work as a team. This probably sounds familiar to many project managers! The England experience shows that it isn't always about having the best people but about getting everyone behind a shared plan and philosophy where everyone knows what they need to do. The success of Iceland and also the English team Leicester which won the Premiership this year prove it.

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URL for previous stakeholder article  
<http://peworldjournal.net/article/risk-doctor-briefing-rolling-back-powerinterest-matrix-new-approach-role-based-stakeholder-engagement-projects/>

April article  
<http://peworldjournal.net/article/why-its-time-to-ditch-whats-in-it-for-me/>

## 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](https://www.routledge.com/Communicating-Projects-An-End-to-End-Guide-to-Planning-Implementing-and-Pilkington/p/book/9781409453192)

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