

Communicating Projects¹

A Year in Project Communication

By Ann Pilkington

During the past year I have been sharing thoughts and ideas about the role of communication in project management. It's something that I feel really passionate about. We all know that statistic of how many change project fail and it is often said that it is in large part down to poor communication.

The end of 2016 seems like a good opportunity to look back over some of the key themes:

- It is a myth to say that people don't like change. If there is one thing that 2016 has taught us is that many people actively seek it! (I am of course referring to Brexit and the US elections.) 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. This was the topic of my July article "Brexit, Football and Project Communication" which you can read at <http://peworldjournal.net/article/brexit-football-and-project-communications/>
- Risk isn't just about risk to the project. Projects contain risk, we all learn on our project management courses, and the management of risk is something that project managers excel at. However, as a communicator coming into the project world, a big thing for me is that the identification of risk is often about risk to the project; there isn't always enough attention paid to potential risks to the wider organisation's reputation. This is why it matters to have a communicator involved in risk identification, because he or she will have the reputation of the organisation in mind and may be sighted on issues elsewhere that could combine to make the perfect storm of a crisis. This was the topic of my May article "Communicating in a Crisis" which you can read here: <http://peworldjournal.net/article/communicating-in-crisis/>
- Come with the problem, not the solution if you want to get the most from your project communicator. In April I discussed a topic that is close to my heart – how the communicator and PR should work together. One thing that really bugs the communicator is being brought a solution rather than the problem. Communication

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.

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! This was the topic of my April article "Getting the most from your project communicator" which you can read here:

<http://pmworldjournal.net/article/communicating-in-crisis/>

- Good communication isn't linear. 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? 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; 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. This was the topic of my June article "What does good communication look like" that you can read here: <http://pmworldjournal.net/article/what-does-good-communication-look-like/>

Effective communication can transform a project's outcomes. My final thought for 2016 is a reminder that communication is a specialist skill. It isn't a "soft" skill. It's tough to get it right. It demands a knowledge of theory and how it applies in practice. Done right it can make the difference between project success and failure.

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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