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*The power of communication and the
challenge of hidden assumptions*
by Prof Darren Dalcher

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

The power of communication and the challenge of hidden assumptions [2]

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Communication is recognised as essential to successful projects (Dalcher, 2012), and indeed for almost any human endeavour. Moreover, one of the most commonly recorded complaints about the performance of organisations and teams relates to their inability to communicate, or to the lack of knowledge regarding the intentions of the executive group. The 2013 Pulse of the Profession Report (PMI, 2013) contends that one in five projects is unsuccessful due to ineffective communication. The report further affirms that a typical project manager should be spending 90 per cent of their time communicating.

Given the critical role of communication in projects, is there any thing new to say about communicating?

When describing communication there is a temptation to focus on the message being sent, the channel that is being utilised or the underpinning technology. The Merriam Webster Dictionary accordingly describes communication as '*a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behavior*'.

However, communication entails a lot more. The Oxford Dictionary defines communication as: '*the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing or using some other medium*', including '*a letter or message containing information or news; the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings; and social contact*'. The Oxford Dictionary traces the use of the phrase communication, to Late Middle English, with a derivation from Old French *counicacion*, and the Latin *communicatio*(n-), originating from the verb *communicare,* meaning 'to share'.

The idea of *sharing* is more powerful than the single direction implied by *imparting*, or even the mutually bi-directional association enabled through *exchanging*. Indeed, the Cambridge Dictionary refers to communication as '*the process of sharing information,*

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especially when this increases understanding between people or groups’. The Collins Dictionary duly notes that communicating can extend beyond mere information to encompass ideas or feelings.

Conveying meaning, increasing understanding and sharing ideas and feelings extend beyond the typical core knowledge and skills taught to managers and leaders and should therefore merit further consideration regarding the potential, place and role of communication.

Exploring the context

Communication is not a smooth process that is constituted by recipient design and intention recognition, as is often implied by the different theories (Kecskes, 2010; p. 50). Firstly, there is a need to account for the internal representations of external things, whilst many of our thoughts are not represented in the external world (Rapaport, 2003; p. 401). Secondly, we *do* communicate with others (ibid.; p. 402)

‘*When you and I speak or write to each other, the most we can hope for is a sort of incremental approach toward agreement, toward communication, toward* common usage of terms.’ (Lenat et al., 1995; p. 45)

The context both constrains and aids the transmission of meaning, especially in unclear, unstructured and ambiguous situations (Dalcher, 2016). Actors do not have access to each other’s thoughts, and must instead be content to interpret the communication actions and gestures that they perceive. Kecskes (2010; p. 51) proposes that the speaker’s knowledge involves constructing a model of the hearer’s knowledge, while the hearer’s knowledge includes constructing a model of the speaker’s knowledge: Both models are constructed so that they remain relevant to the given situational context as it is understood by each of the two parties. Rapaport (2003; p. 402) observes that ‘*in order for two cognitive agents to communicate successfully, whether about an internal thing or an external thing, they must be able to detect misunderstandings and correct them by negotiating*’.

Communication can be viewed as the result of the interplay between intention and attention (Kecskes, 2010; p. 58). Communication also implies a degree of acceptance and manipulation (Grammer et al., 1997) and other observable manifestations of a relationship (Watzlawick et al, 2011). Watzlawick et al. assert that rather than focus on a piece of communication, attention should be paid to the effect that the receiver’s reaction has on the sender; and hence on the sender-receiver relationship, as mediated by communication (2011. P. 4).

Meaning is socially constructed and context-sensitive and is the emerging result of the co-operation between the parties during the course of communication (Kecskes, 2010; p. 51). Communication should thus be perceived as a trial-and-error process that is co-constructed by participants (ibid.; p. 69). Kecskes posits a socio-cognitive position that implies that the speaker and hearer are both equal participants in the communication

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process as they both produce and interpret, whilst being part of a dynamic process (ibid., p. 58). Yet, what is recovered is not always what was intended.

'We almost always fail… Yet, we almost always nearly succeed: This is the paradox of communication. Its resolution is simple: Misunderstandings, if small enough, can be ignored. And those that cannot be ignored can be minimized through negotiation' (Rapaport, 2003; p. 402).

But what would happen if the misunderstandings and mismatches remain hidden and elude detection? Similarly, what happens when opportunities for meaningful communication are not exploited?

The peril and power of hidden assumptions

On Friday evening, July 17, 1981, the lobby of the newest hotel in Kansas City was crowded with dancers, and the walkways above packed with spectators tapping to the rhythm of the music. The evening ended with the catastrophic collapse of the two packed walkways onto the crowded lobby below. In the mayhem 114 people were killed and around 200 injured. The Hyatt Regency became known as the worst structural tragedy in the history of the United States. The plaintiff's claims following the collapse amounted to more than three billion dollars, also the largest ever claim in a structural failure case.

The 1981 collapse of Kansas City's Hyatt Regency Hotel occurred because the contractor was unable to procure threaded rods sufficiently long to suspend a second-floor walkway from a roof truss and settled instead, on hanging it from a fourth floor walkway using shorter rods. The architectural designers relied on the reliability of the long rods for their design (and implicitly assumed that they could be obtained). The procurement process proceeded downstream in a staged fashion: When the contractors could not obtain the rods needed (and were unable to go back to alter the architectural design or to assess the implications of the change), they 'assumed' that the alternative would suffice. The impact of the late decision was that fourth-floor walkway was designed and delivered according to the original plan, but in practice, it had to be able to handle its own load as well as that of the lower walkway.

A key problem was the lack of communication between the designers and fabricators. The designers were not aware of the difficulty in obtaining the right size rods, while, the fabricators did not understand the critical role of the rods. The separation of 'planning' from 'doing' (Dalcher, 2017; 2019) precluded the possibility of finding out about the implementation problems during the early stages and of sharing the design rationale with the later stages. Such linear separation weakens the basis of development by hiding some of the knowledge that is generated throughout the process and effectively sealing it, or concealing it, within a single phase. More crucially, the information was not available for critical risk assessment as neither the original rationale nor the physical constraints uncovered by the fabricators were recorded. In this case, neither party recorded their assumptions. However, the increased focus on the recording of design rationale and assumptions enables more effective risk assessment of the implications of

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assumptions and opens the potential for the identification of resulting complications likely to be encountered in later stages.

Communication between the different stakeholders is essential. Ideologies, beliefs and assumptions tend to remain implicit and 'unargued' while participants are unable, or unwilling, to spell out their positions. All approaches used in development and management embody certain assumptions while omitting other considerations. In some cases the context is misunderstood, in others it is incorrectly identified. In yet other situations, some relevant aspects may be missing or changes may simply invalidate previous understanding. Regardless of the reason, unless the understanding is communicated it cannot be shared and utilised.

A key to communication lies in understanding the personal frames, or perspectives, of participants. Frames encompass assumptions and perceptions, which are never registered. In complex design situations this calls for an explicit framework for addressing assumptions and rationales. Adopting an adversarial approach encourages designers to re-examine their assumptions and their validity. Such a framework would call for:

- Identification and recording of assumptions and rationale
- Avoidance of pre-mature closure and early commitment to a final course of action
- Encouragement of diversity and multiplicity of perspectives
- Adoption of explicit risk analysis procedures aimed at challenging the assumptions
- Challenging of assumptions and decisions, in light of new and contradictory information
- Willingness to learn through reflection and to make the necessary revisions and corrections

The communication around the Hyatt Regency Hotel was downstream, one directional and partial. There were no opportunities to expand the communication, identify critical key assumptions, or make the conversation two sided and dialogical. As projects proceed downstream it is often difficult to pause and reflect and therefore the need to record the rationale for decisions and choices is essential, especially for future reference.

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan noted that most of our assumptions outlive their usefulness. The Hyatt Regency Hotel disaster also serves as a reminder of the destructive power of hidden assumptions. Effective communication and risk management require the establishment of a clear and shared context. The key issue is in challenging the right (or rather the 'wrong') assumptions. Hidden assumptions thus become the driving force that needs to be exposed, explored and challenged. The adoption of a more adversarial stance which can be used to expose underpinning assumptions relies on developing an emphasis on the situational context of the problem, the changing nature of the process and the substantial amount of hidden and tacit understanding and skills of stakeholders and participants. Many psychologists define

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learning as the detection and correction of error. Avoiding the collapse of buildings and for that matter, the well publicised failures of IT systems and other critical projects, may ultimately require a more active approach to uncovering and managing the context and the hidden assumptions that key players bring to a situation.

New insights in communicating project management

US Management author guru, Peter Drucker wryly observed that '*the most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said*'. So how do we begin to listen for what is not being said? Indeed, does communication allow us to uncover the hidden assumptions? Moreover, is our stance or position always laden with additional information, and if so, how do we begin to unpack and explore it?

It is clearly important to understand project managers, and recognise what baggage and assumptions they may harbour. Our guest article written by Benjamin Lauren is extracted from his recent book *Communicating Project Management: A Participatory Rhetoric for Development Teams*, published by Routledge. As projects become more central to societal endeavours, Lauren makes a case for a deeper understanding of project management as a collaborative practice. His work offers a glimpse of how experienced project managers encourage and support teams and how they understand, interact with and negotiate the increasingly complex facets of modern projects.

Lauren opens up new avenues for inquiry into the work of experienced project managers. Given the paucity of scholarly exploration of the dynamics of project management practice, it is encouraging to consider new perspectives that might derive fresh insights and new ideas that could invigorate the principles and practice of project management. His position recognises a major assumption underpinning project practice that project management is about making teams efficient by using tools and processes. Recognising that project managers have other roles makes it possible to consider alternative positions and emphasise different aspects. Lauren's focus is on positioning project managers as 'writers': People, who assemble words and figures, prepare agendas and coordinate networks. Indeed, if most of project managers' work revolves around writing (or 90% communication), perhaps it is time to consider new perspectives for understanding the value, assumptions and emphases embedded within the role. Such a perspective may offer new ways of influencing team dynamics, leading and developing individuals and supporting teams.

As we have already established, the need to communicate is an essential part of project management; however, very little scholarly effort has been invested in studying communication within the context of projects. Lauren's chief interest is in '*the role of participation in communicating project management as a means for understanding it as writing—as a designed system of communication that has great influence over how people work*' (2018; p. 3).

At a time when projects are increasingly decentralised and agile and lean approaches offer alternative arrangements and organisational structures, it might be interesting to

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renew the focus on project managers by considering their role in communicating throughout projects.

Lauren boldly embraces a renewed paradigm for project work that progresses from a fixation with efficiency, towards a growing recognition of the need to accommodate people, politics and social arrangements. The new perspective revolves around participation as an alternative position, which emphasises the role of communication. A participative approach enables a rethinking of project management and its ability to support and develop teams and individuals.

In the article Lauren explores two alternative metaphors used to describe leadership in different project settings. The metaphors uncover different approaches and value sets enabling a comparison of the communication and leadership styles that each one supports. The approaches appear to be both constrained and defined by the values of leadership and perspectives on development held by the different leaders. Each of the metaphors can be said to be underpinned by specific values and norms that reflect the particular lens or leadership perspective. Much like the assumptions explored earlier, patterns of behaviour are also enfolded into particular views and perspectives. Uncovering the associated values provides insightful context for understanding leadership and communication in the workplace, whilst offering new food for thought for developing fresh theoretical and pragmatic perspectives for improving project communicating, and developing a better basis for understanding and supporting project practice.

British author and biologist Rupert Sheldrake observed that '*the sciences are being held back by assumptions that have hardened into dogmas, maintained by powerful taboos. I believe that the sciences will be regenerated when they are set free.*' Similar sentiment can be observed regarding the assumptions, dogma and taboos underpinning the state of project management practice. The theoretical and pragmatic basis of the discipline would benefit from fresh thinking into project communicating, stakeholders, benefits and many other new areas. The new work around participation and communicating in projects offers a great potential for challenging our hidden assumptions, reflecting on our paradigms and regenerating, revitalising and refreshing our understanding of effective project practice.

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