PM World Journal
Vol. VI, Issue I – January 2017
www.pmworldjournal.net

Better Project Management Communication
by Dr. Bill Brantley & Mary Ashlock, PhD
Featured Paper

Better Project Management Communication by Fostering Understanding

Dr. William A. Brantley, PMP

Dr. Mary Z. Ashlock

How often have you heard that 90% of the project manager's work is communication? Most project managers would agree with that statistic. However, is communication in project management different from communication in general? What role does communication play in project management?

The authors of this article are in the midst of large research project to determine the role communication has in successfully managing projects. The first step is to define project management communication. Thus, the authors examined the business management and communication research literature to investigate how communication is defined in project management.

After reviewing 272 peer-reviewed articles collected from the last forty years, the authors discovered that project management communication has many definitions. The definitions can be categorized into one of two general communication models. In the next section, the two models will be described and how one model arises from the other.

The Two Models of Project Management Communication

The first model is often known as the "Shannon-Weaver model" (1949) because of the two researchers who formulated the theory in the late 1940s. The Shannon-Weaver model is also known as the transmission model because it does just that – it allows individuals to transmit information. Kraus (2006) describes the key components of the transmission model in this way:

> "[C}ommunication requires a sender and a receiver. Verbal communication is one of the primary means humans use to communicate with each other. Like all forms of communication, speech isn't really communication unless there is a message, the message is transmitted, it is received, it is transmitted in a code, or language, understood by the receiver or a means of translating the message is available, and that the message is understood by the receiver. Enhancements might include acknowledgement by the receiver of receipt of the message and that the receiver attached the same meaning and importance to the message that the transmitter intended, feedback. Unfortunately, in spoken communication as in radio and other types of communications, often static interferes with the end result." (p. PM.09.01)

The second model comes from Buhler's speech theories which he formulated in the 1930s. Luhmann (1995) built on Buhler's theories to develop the emergent model of communication which is composed of three components: information, utterance, and understanding. Information

PM World *Journal*
Vol. VI, Issue I – January 2017
www.pmworldjournal.net

Better Project Management Communication
by Dr. Bill Brantley & Mary Ashlock, PhD
Featured Paper

is a "selection from a repertoire of possibilities" (Koskinen, 2013, p. 353). Utterances "refer to the form of and reason for a communication" (p. 353). Understanding is defined as the difference between information and utterances. The key here is the role of understanding: "While most communication theories (Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Chandler, 1994) refer only to the first two elements—information and utterance—of Luhmann's concept, the third element (i.e. understanding) plays a central role. Instead of approaching a communication from the intended meaning of the communication, Luhmann reverses the perspective: a communication is ultimately determined through understanding" (Seidl & Becker, 2005).

As the authors discovered in their research, the emergent model allows communicators to think about the other layers of communication. For example, what kind of relational communication is the communicator using? Is the communicator paying attention to not just the content of the meaning but the overall emotions and history involved with this project or individuals? In general, project management communication research appears to be moving away from the transmission model to the emergent model.

Organizational-Level versus Team-Level Project Management Communication

Another division that the authors found in their research was a seeming split between project management communication on the organizational level and the project team level. Project managers often encounter situations where their roles are not clearly defined within their organizations. As this occurs, it is important for individuals to become clear on their responsibilities and decision-making capabilities as they navigate throughout the organization. Project managers need to exhibit communication competence which is the "ability to adapt one's communication to achieve one's goals" and appropriateness which refers to "following the rules, norms and expectations for specific situations or relationships." (Alberts, et al., 2016, pp. 20).

Project managers need to be familiar with the organizational-wide function and structure. For example, individuals within an organization have patterns of communication with other individuals through downward, upward and horizontal communication. Some of this communication is done through formal, designated channels of communication and some of it is done through informal channels (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). For example, the project manager may have a formal sponsor of a project team in addition to other resource staff members to support the team. "Knowing what questions to ask and how to ask them will improve your ability to accomplish your goals." (Alberts, et al., 2016, p. 258).

Equally important is the ability of the project manager to motivate and lead the project team effectively. Team-focused communication requires specific skills such as coaching, mentoring, and negotiating. How to reconcile the project manager's need for proficiency in organizational communication with proficiency in communicating with project teams is a future research area for the authors.

PM World *Journal*
Vol. VI, Issue I – January 2017
www.pmworldjournal.net

Better Project Management Communication
by Dr. Bill Brantley & Mary Ashlock, PhD
Featured Paper

Cultural Aspects of Project Management Communication

Closely related to the need for project team communication proficiency is the ability to communicate across cultures. Project managers work with a variety of project team members from many different backgrounds whether in the United States or through global teams. It is increasingly important for project managers to be aware of the importance of intercultural communication including the following four benefits: (1) increased opportunities for intercultural contact (2) enhanced business effectiveness (3) improved intergroup relations and (4) enhanced self-awareness (Alberts, et al., 2016, pp. 165-170). The shared meaning between project managers and team members is then generated versus someone's culture becoming a barrier to the communication.

Project managers need to be able to exhibit communication competence which is the "ability to adapt one's communication to achieve one's goals" and appropriateness which refers to "following the rules, norms and expectations for specific situations or relationships." (Alberts, et al., 2016, p. 20) As the authors found, the transmission model treats culture differently from the emergent model. Cultural differences are a source of noise which presents the effective sending and receiving of messages (Loosemore & Lee, 2002). In contrast, the emergent model emphasizes the understanding of cultural differences as a key to effective communication (Bohm, 2013). In the next section, the authors will describe three other ways that the emergent communication model can help project managers communicate more effectively.

Using the Emergent Communication Model to Communicate More Effectively

The following three methods rely on the understanding component of the emergent communication model. The first two components of the emergent communication model encompass the transmission model in that information is transmitted through utterances. It is the understanding component that gives the emergent model its power. Thus, communicating to be understood and testing that understanding has taken place is the key to effective communication.

The first method is to promote listening training among the project team members and the stakeholders. Good listening training helps communicators structure the message for better comprehension and to look for cues that the message is received and understood. Active listening training gives the team and stakeholders tools to receive messages and test for understanding better.

The second method is emotional intelligence training. One of the authors of this article, Dr. Ashlock, has found, through research and in her work as an organizational development consultant, that even a basic introductory course in emotional intelligence can greatly improve team communication. Emotional intelligence awareness helps the communicator improve his or her non-verbal communication and become better aware of the non-verbal communications from his or her team. Emotional intelligence training also helps to increase organizational communication effectiveness. Written and spoken communication are only part of the message;

PM World Journal
Vol. VI, Issue I – January 2017
www.pmworldjournal.net

Better Project Management Communication
by Dr. Bill Brantley & Mary Ashlock, PhD
Featured Paper

understanding the non-verbal subtext inherent in the message is vital to comprehending the whole message.

Using human-centered design (HCD) techniques is the third method to increase understanding. HCD techniques are a set of structured exercises that uses visual communication methods and group dialogue activities to help bring about understanding based on a common goal or problem. HCD is an effective way for a large group to display how everyone understands the goal or problem and then work toward a shared understanding. The best part of HCD is that numerous visual artifacts are produced that embody the shared understanding so that people who were not at the HCD session can easily comprehend the shared understanding.

The Future of Project Management Communication

Understanding the two models of project management communication is just the first step to the authors' research project on determining the connection between good communication and project success. Establishing the two models of project management communication (transmission and emergent) has revealed that an important factor in effective project management communication is better understanding. The next step in the research project is to determine how to link effective organizational communication with project team communication to promote better understanding from the team level up through the organization.

PM World Journal
Vol. VI, Issue I – January 2017
www.pmworldjournal.net

Better Project Management Communication
by Dr. Bill Brantley & Mary Ashlock, PhD
Featured Paper

References

Alberts, J.K., Nakayama, T.K., & Martin, J.N. (2016). *Human communication in society.* Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Bohm, C. (2013). Cultural flexibility in ICT projects: A new perspective on managing diversity in project teams. *Global Journal of Flexible Systems Management*, 14(2), 115–122.

Buhler, K. (1934). *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* [Speech Theory: The Function of Language Observation]. Jena, Germany: G. Fischer.

Chandler, D. (1994). The transmission model of communication. Retrieved from www.aber.ac.uk/ media/Documents/short/trans.html (accessed June 11, 2011).

Koskinen, K. U. (2013). Observation's role in technically complex project implementation: The social autopoietic system view. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 6(2), 349–364.

Kraus, W. E. (2006). The "Cool Hand Luke" theory of project communication. *AACE International Transactions*;2006, 9.1.

Loosemore, M., & Lee P. (2002). Communication problem with ethnic minorities in the construction industry. *International Journal of Project Management*, 20, 517–524.

Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Putnam, L.L., Phillips, N., & Chapman, P. (1996). Metaphors of communication and organization. In S.R. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W.R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational studies* (pp. 375-408). London: Sage.

Seidl, D., & Becker, K. H. (2005). *Nikolas Luhmann and organization studies*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1949). The mathematical theory of communication. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

PM World Journal
Vol. VI, Issue I – January 2017
www.pmworldjournal.net

Better Project Management Communication
by Dr. Bill Brantley & Mary Ashlock, PhD
Featured Paper

About the Authors

Dr. Bill Brantley

University of Maryland
College Park, MD, USA

Dr. Bill Brantley has an MBA in project management, became a certified PMP in 2003, and has taught project management courses for over a decade. He teaches project management communication for UMD's Project Management Center for Excellence. During the day, he is a training administrator for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office where he manages IT projects, training projects, and is an active contributor to the Federal government's agile project management community. Dr. Brantley can be contacted at bill.brantley@gmail.com

Mary Z. Ashlock, PhD

University of Louisville
Louisville, KY, USA

Mary Z. Ashlock, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Louisville. For over 27 years she has worked in higher education and business. During Dr. Ashlock's time at the University of Louisville she has done research and published in areas of health communication, speech anxiety, and corporate communication. Dr. Ashlock's work has resulted in numerous regional and national conference presentations, book projects, and journal articles. She regularly teaches undergraduate and graduate students in business and organizational communication courses.