PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480) *Communication – still the cornerstone of project success*
Vol. XI, Issue III – March 2022 by Jürgen Oschadleus
www.pmworldjournal.com Commentary

Communication – *still* the cornerstone of project success [1, 2]

Jürgen Oschadleus

Project Management South Africa (PMSA) celebrates its 25th year, and I was thrilled to be invited to the November 2021 conference to reprise a paper I presented at their inaugural conference in November 1997. The world today is vastly different from then. The challenges of delivering projects have increased exponentially. The pace of change has accelerated even as the attention span of stakeholders has shrunk. Uncertainty dominates. Social media has amplified the noise clogging the airwaves. The way in which we communicate today bears little resemblance to what it once was. While access to information has never been easier, connecting information and people in a meaningful, effective manner seems harder than ever. As much as technology allows us to move content around the globe in milliseconds, the time to truly engage and absorb information and distil meaning has reduced proportionally. And yet it is as true today as it ever has been, that communication is still the cornerstone of project success.

When I started out in project management I was interested in the mechanics of communication. The 1997 paper focused extensively on the communications management plan and the well-known sender/receiver model articulated by Shannon and Weaver in 1947. I cited the newly released *Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management* (Vol 2, 21 July 1996, p. 16), which stated:

> Project communications management provides a critical link between people, ideas and information at all stages in the project life-cycle. Project communications management ensures the timely and appropriate generation, collection, dissemination, storage and disposition of project information via formal structures and processes to aid in decision making, and the control of informal communication networks to aid the achievement of project objectives.

And I highlighted the role of the project office (i.e. PMO) as the central location from which the communications management plan could be deployed into a project. These principles are still relevant and necessary, but they are not enough.

Over the years I have conducted numerous project reviews (in-flight and post implementation), both on projects I have managed, and as a third-party consultant to others. I have read extensively on projects that have made the headlines and have shaped how we live; I have engaged with and taught business leaders and have learned about

---

[1] This article is based on a presentation by the author during the Project Management South Africa (PMSA) 2021 National Project Management Conference held virtually in November 2021. The PMWJ was a media partner for that event. To learn more about PMSA and their events, visit https://www.projectmanagement.org.za/. For more on the subject of this article, see the author profile at the end of this article and contact the author directly.

[2] How to cite this article: Oschadleus, J. (2022). Communication – *still* the cornerstone of project success, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue III, March.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)   *Communication – still the cornerstone of project success*
Vol. XI, Issue III – March 2022   by Jürgen Oschadleus
www.pmworldjournal.com   Commentary

projects in their world. Amidst all the learnings, one unescapable truth emerges: **communication shapes performance**. Great communication was a characteristic in every successful projects, just as poor communication was a hallmark in every project failure.

Successful projects have challenges. But they are built on a foundation of effective, open, honest and trust-based communication. Yes, difficulties arose. But problems were identified, addressed and resolved; conflict was managed (even welcomed) and accountabilities clarified and accepted. Team members and stakeholders could speak their mind.

Equally true was the observation that every failed and significantly challenged project suffered from, and was characterised by, poor communication. Communication that was totally absent, or misinformed and misleading. Communication that may have delivered the contractual obligations of the communications management plan, but not its spirit and intent. Key messages that were buried in an avalanche of electronic noise, or delivered in different metaphorical languages that obscured their importance and value. At times this was the result of an intentional desire to manipulate or distort information, but more often it was the natural yet unintended consequence of how we process information and communicate with each other.

The challenge for us as project leaders is finding out how to maximise the effectiveness of our own and our team's communication, while overcoming the causes of miscommunication. That prompted me to go back to re-examine my 1997 title – communication, the cornerstone of project success.

Just what is a cornerstone, and why is it so pivotal to success?

The term 'cornerstone' dates back to the 13th century, and referred to the first stone laid when constructing a masonry foundation. It would disappear beneath the surface, but served as the reference point against which every other stone would be laid. Invisible, unseen; yet it placed a building in a specific geographic location and orientation.

These days the cornerstone has a ceremonial function. It is no longer the first stone laid, but is added in a prominent, visible location of a building at a later date. It generally provides details like when the building was opened, and by whom. It informs, but does not shape.

And so it is with communication. We have the visible parts – the vision statement, the coloured charts of baselined schedule, risk bubbles, and stakeholders, the communications and risk management plans, and more. They inform. But do they shape?

A statement often erroneously attributed to George Bernard Shaw suggests that the greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred.[3] My project

---

[3] Quote Investigator identifies the earliest version of this statement in the 1952 book, *Is Anybody Listening?*, where journalist William H Whyte writes: "The great enemy of communication, we find, is the illusion of it. We have

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)   *Communication – still the cornerstone of project success*
Vol. XI, Issue III – March 2022   by Jürgen Oschadleus
www.pmworldjournal.com   Commentary

reviews frequently discovered key artefacts that were created to tick a box in the corporate methodology, and then never consulted again. We encountered numerous statements like "Of course we communicated that; we sent out an email", or "That [important fact] was provided [on p. 554] of the contract". We may have ticked a box; we may even think we communicated something. But have we?

The heart of communications in a project lies buried in its foundations, unseen and unheralded, but absolutely instrumental in shaping how stakeholders engage and interact with each other. We can express it in two core concepts:

1. The Latin root of the word 'communication' – *communis* – which is literally translated as "in common". What do we have in common with the people we're communicating with? Are we looking for, and building on, a common understanding, or are we so focused on being right, on making our opinion heard in the sea of auditory pollution that we have lost sight of why we're communicating in the first place?

2. The concept of 'psychological safety', which has gained considerable attention in the well-being literature. Psychological safety can be defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking; team members feel accepted and respected in their work environment, and can speak their mind without fear of negative consequences.

Creating an environment where open communication occurs in a psychologically safe manner begins at two levels. First, at the most senior levels of an organisation, where the leadership team needs to model and reward open, safe communication. And secondly, within each individual – i.e. with me. Regardless of the organisational communication culture, I need to take responsibility for the way in which I communicate. And while I may not be able to change my organisation's culture in the short term, every one of us has the ability to improve our own communication effectiveness. The method was outlined by Aristotle, some 2,500 years ago. He identified three methods by which we seek to persuade others. In reverse order they are:

- *Logos* (logic) – the rationale or proof of a matter; this is commonly where we like going in a typical business interaction. "Just give me the facts". We mistakenly believe that when people have the same facts as we do, they will reach the same conclusions we did. Because the facts are – well, the facts. Unbiased, no agenda, no misinterpretation. Yeah, right! The facts are important, and logic does have to be soundly constructed, but successful communication requires much more than just the facts.

- *Pathos* (how we make people feel) – being able to inspire and motivate people is a core attribute of leadership, and therefore a critical communication competence. Great orators and great con artists have the ability to put their audiences into

---

talked enough; but we have not listened. And by not listening we have failed to concede the immense complexity of our society–and thus the great gaps between ourselves and those with whom we seek understanding."

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)   *Communication – still the cornerstone of project success*
Vol. XI, Issue III – March 2022   by Jürgen Oschadleus
www.pmworldjournal.com   Commentary

mindsets where they would willingly march into the deadly enemy fire, or purchase a product they don't need and can't afford in order to impress people they don't like. Connecting with people – making them feel heard, understood and valued – is a great skill to have, and a dangerous one. Dangerous, because connection without character breeds arrogance and ego.

- *Ethos* (character), who we are. Our humility and teachability as leaders. The integrity with which we undertake our work and engage with our stakeholders. Our commitment to tell the truth with kindness, to seek the best interests for our project stakeholders, not only ourselves or our own organisation. Our willingness to serve, to admit we don't know, and confess where we got things wrong. To ask more, and to listen more.

All three elements are necessary to communicate openly, honestly and authentically. All three are skills and attributes that can be learned. All three intertwine and create the cornerstones that shape who we are, how we communicate, and what sort of success we achieve.

About the Author

Jürgen Oschadleus

Sydney, Australia

Jürgen Oschadleus is Director of project and leadership training, consulting and advisory services at ACT Knowledge in Australia. He is an international speaker, educator, consultant and coach on project leadership, influence and effective communication. He combines his background in history, teaching and technology projects with a fascination for sport and psychology, and uses this to challenge people's thinking and help them create new mental connections, apply knowledge and achieve the outcomes they seek.

With over 25 years of education, strategic consulting, systems deployment and leadership development projects on five continents, Jürgen has been exposed to a broad range of industries across the commercial and public sector, and often presents postgraduate classes at UNSW and Sydney University. Qualifications include MBA,

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*   *Communication – still the cornerstone of project success*
Vol. XI, Issue III – March 2022   by Jürgen Oschadleus
www.pmworldjournal.com   Commentary

PMP and DASSM from PMI, and MAIPM from AIPM. For more, visit
https://actknowledge.com or http://au.linkedin.com/in/oschadleus. He can be contacted
at jurgen@actknowledge.com

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*   *Communication – still the cornerstone of project success*
Vol. XI, Issue III – March 2022   by Jürgen Oschadleus
www.pmworldjournal.com   Commentary