

Project Management in the time of COVID¹

Rethinking Communication

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Dr. Lynda Bourne

In July 2022, the federal Department of Health announced that Australia had reached the milestone of 10 000 COVID deaths; most of those who have died were over 65. Australia's population is almost 26 million, so these numbers are significant. At the time of writing (August 2022), the health authorities are assuring us that these deaths and hospitalizations appear to be trending downwards. At the same time, they are pleading with us to continue to wear masks when indoors. These messages like many messages circulated throughout the various stages of the pandemic here in Australia have not reached all intended audiences. To many, the messages are confusing or just ignored as not relevant.

This is the fourth paper in the series: PM in the time of COVID, offering ideas for reviewing and reforming the practice of project management, and focused on experiences in Australia but also reflecting on global experiences. The topics of previous papers in this series outlined approaches to uncertainty, governance and leadership, and more adaptable team structures for post-pandemic project work. This paper will focus on what we have now discovered anew about effective communication from experiences of pandemic-era communication: what worked and what didn't work, with a view to reviewing and revising project and organization communications.

This paper is organized as follows: firstly, a discussion about why effective communication is so important, followed by descriptions of stakeholders and their influence on project and organization success. The second part discusses effective communication as the only tool for engaging stakeholders and adapting project and organization communication to support new team structures and new ways of engaging project and organization stakeholders. The third section will focus on lockdown-era communications: the best and the least effective, and how these learnings can be applied to post-pandemic activities and to rethink approaches to organizational communication.

¹ This series is by Dr. Lynda Bourne, author of the books *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation* (2009), *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders* (2011) and several others. She is a globally-recognized expert on project stakeholder engagement, risk management and other PM-related topics. For more, see her author profile at the end of this article.

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The importance of effective communication

Effective communication is a process of sending a message that is received and understood as intended. This means that the message must be crafted to ensure that the intended receiver (or receivers) can interpret the words, meaning and context of the message to enable them to receive relevant information, to feel reassured, or to act on the intention of the message.

We don't do this very well: not individuals, not organizations, not Governments, not even advertisers. And in times of crisis we are even less effective.

The potential targets of any pandemic-related message are so diverse that a one-size-fits-all or even a one-size-fits-most approach will fail. Governments and health authorities could never get ahead of messaging to advise all parts of the community with essential messages constantly changing, especially in the early days of the pandemic. As health authorities and Governments learned more about the virus the messages to residents needed to change, but this led to confusion and providing more scope for misinformation and the spread of conspiracy theories.

During Melbourne's lockdowns the State government made valiant attempts to provide information to all residents with the Premier presenting daily updates. The daily updates were broadcast through television news and public information paid content, on commercial radio and on some social media outlets. Print newspapers also published daily data on infections, deaths, and where to get tested. The information was useful and comprehensive and provided essential data to people who listened to the radio, watched free-to-air television, followed the Premier on social media or read print media. Too many others did not receive their information this way; some were exposed to alternative health views including self-conducted 'research' that espoused alternative remedies, anti-vaxxers, and those who told us that COVID was just another type of flu. Our migrant communities whose first language was mostly not English, other residents who did not watch print or social media, or those lowest-paid workers who were too busy providing services to keep the country running - transport, health, food production - often missed out on this vital information.

In short, during the early days of the pandemic, Governments and health authorities 'lost the plot on COVID messaging'³. This improved throughout the Delta outbreak once they recognized the need to provide targeted information to the most vulnerable communities through their community leaders. Support groups within these communities quickly became partners of the health authorities and governments to manage information into their communities and also to provide feedback on how to best deliver additional services, and further improve information flows.

³ Duckett, S. 'We lost the plot on COVID messaging – now governments will have to be bold to get us back on track'. www.theconversation.com. Viewed July 14, 2022

We are now in the second phase of pandemic response - 'living with COVID' - information about daily COVID deaths, hospitalizations is available on the federal Government's Health Department website and occasionally on regular television news or tucked away in back pages of the newspapers. Despite larger numbers of deaths and hospitalizations, Governments are more low-key about enforcing further mandates, and making updates easily available. Currently there are few mandates for masks or other restrictions despite the soaring numbers of infections and deaths. There are elections imminent in the largest states – NSW and Victoria. This may explain reluctance to impose mandates, and only offering 'strong advice', despite the fact that the health systems are under enormous strain.

This soft approach is failing to provide answers to the many questions people are still asking. How many doses of vaccine should we have? What does *individual responsibility* really mean? If masks are recommended, what type of masks are best – should we all have N95 or are cloth masks good enough? Where can we find information about the number of deaths of unvaccinated people? Should politicians show leadership by wearing masks in public?

The unanswered question is: to what extent do Governments have a duty of care for their residents? Should they do everything possible to ensure that the appropriate services are available, that there is information about the virus and how to avoid catching it and spreading it, how to get a vaccine when they become available, and information about rare side effects. From the perspective of the residents of Australia our Governments had the responsibility to ensure everyone had the necessary information for their health and safety but also so that they understood how to protect their community through their actions or inactions. This information must be offered multiple ways to present the essential information so that a greater proportion of residents could understand the message. How to convince younger residents to take precautions and put their social life on hold when they knew that they were not part of the most vulnerable cohort? How to ensure that older residents who had escaped from untrustworthy regimes that the government had their best interests, even when they forced whole communities to remain in their tower blocks? How to reassure small businesses and help them survive through financial assistance?

Another communication challenge for governments and health authorities was the intense effort involved with identifying and countering false information = 'fake news'. Information about the seriousness of COVID itself, about measures to protect residents until a vaccine was developed, about the false prophets offering prayer or existing medications or alternative prevention measures, about fears that were circulated in the early days of vaccine when we heard about the small number of vaccinations that caused severe reactions or even death. It is a symptom of the authorities' communication failures that too many people turned to social media and other alternative sources of information for answers.

In the case of pandemic communication, every person was a stakeholder; every person was affected by the spread of the virus, every person needed information for their own sake but also for the sake of others. And every person required targeted information to best allow them to do that. In many cases the most effective information was received by word-of-mouth or through specific targeted messages from trusted health professionals, family members, individuals or groups or communities with similar backgrounds. Without official information people will turn to other sources or select options that best fit their own world view. These sources of information will have more influence than the official sources, even if the message is wrong.

The lessons from the responses to the pandemic provide convincing and current data that apply to everyday communication, business communication or other types of information exchange. Nothing about the use of targeted communication to engage stakeholders is new! The lessons learned from the successes and failures of pandemic communication should now be reviewed against pre-pandemic ‘normal’ communication strategies and implementation. The goal as always is to assist organizations or projects to ensure that their stakeholders receive accurate, timely and appropriate information, to provide them with correct information to achieve strategic goals, personal aims, organizational imperatives or just to reduce confusion.

Stakeholders and their influence on project and organization success

The concept of stakeholder existed long before management writers (in the West) took up the cause and adapted the word and concept for an organizational purpose. www.dictionary.com defines *stakeholder* in the following ways:

1. The holder of the stakes of a wager (*this was the original meaning of the word*).
2. A person or group that has an investment, share, or interest in something, as a business or industry (this is now the generally accepted usage in the English-speaking business world).
3. In law: a person holding money or property to [which](#) two or more persons make rival claims.

The meaning and concept of *stakeholder* in the English-speaking world is hazy, with no common agreement on who are stakeholders. Translations of *stakeholder* into other languages seem to indicate quite specific and differing ideas about the role and influence of stakeholders. Listed below are some examples derived from my discussions with colleagues from different language backgrounds⁴:

⁴ In interviews with managers in organizations in the Spanish-speaking countries in South America, I discovered that ‘stakeholder’ translated has many meanings, often focussing on just one attribute rather than the more inclusive definition becoming more accepted in the English-speaking world. This led to my informal enquiry of my international colleagues regarding how ‘stakeholder’ was translated.

- In Spanish: *tenedor de apuestas* (holding the wager) and *partes interesadas* (interested parties)
- In French: *Des parties prenantes* (parties who are taking) and *intervenantes* (intervening)
- In German: *Beteiligten* (involved) and *Anspruchsgruppen* (who have a claim)

A project-centric definition comes from PMI's *Standard for Project Management* (PMI, 2021, p.31).

An individual, group, or organization who may affect, be affected by, or perceive itself to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project. Stakeholders also directly or indirectly influence a project, its performance or outcome in either a positive or negative way.

The strength of this definition of stakeholders is that it is widespread and also considers the diverse functions that a stakeholder may have within the organization and outside it. It recognizes that a stakeholder may have multiple roles and therefore assists in ensuring that no individual or group that fits the definition of stakeholder is ignored. Understanding what each key stakeholder expects to gain (or lose) from the outcomes of the work (either its success or failure) is essential to the success of the work and the perceptions of the stakeholder community. Equally, understanding of how important stakeholders perceive the effects and progress of the work in meeting their expectations is essential.

A stakeholder has a *stake* in the activity, portfolio, program, or project. Therefore it is important to consider the nature of a stakeholder's stake when defining a stakeholder's needs, requirements, or how the individual or group can impact the organization's activities. This stake may be:

- An interest: a circumstance where a person or group is affected by a decision, action, or outcome.
- Rights: legal – as enshrined in legislation; or moral - environmental, heritage, or social issues.
- Ownership: legal title to real property, intellectual property, or a worker's right to be compensated for his or her experience or application of specialist knowledge.
- Contribution in the form of knowledge or support.

A Methodology

Successful engagement of stakeholders depends on understanding the expectations of these stakeholders or stakeholder groups and providing information that supports those expectations or

counters them in the case of negative expectations⁵. It is not possible to measure the expectations or perceptions of people objectively and foolish to imagine that it is possible to guess or assume them. A consistent approach – a methodology – for tracking any changes in stakeholder attitudes is critical, along with a means to track trends. A methodology that records significant data elements such as support for the work can provide data to baseline the level of engagement. Periodic data collections can track changes in these data elements and will be a useful indicator of the success of the team’s efforts at engagement.

The *Stakeholder Circle*® methodology⁶ is based on such a concept. It supports the identification of the community (or network) of stakeholders defined as important to the success of the activity at the current time. Five steps support a consistent approach to data collection to facilitates to understanding of the stakeholder community for any project or organizational activity. They are:

- *Step 1*: identification of all stakeholders.
- *Step 2*: prioritization to determine who is important.
- *Step 3*: visualization to understand the overall stakeholder community.
- *Step 4*: engagement through effective communications.
- *Step 5*: monitoring the effect of the engagement.

Lockdown-era communications

When Melbourne (Australia) completed its last day of lockdown October 21, 2021, its residents had experienced 263 days of lockdown over 6 or 7 periods. At the time it was considered to be the longest series of lockdowns world-wide (perhaps now overtaken by some cities in China?). As Australia and other countries emerge from the many existential difficulties of this pandemic-era, organizations must prepare for ‘afterwards’ and seek opportunities to reform people management processes and practices through:

- Recognition that the current climate of uncertainty is still causing anxiety for workers.
- Addressing the complexities of project relationships within teams, and among other stakeholders who have experienced a different mode of team and project working over the past two years.
- Supporting the development of resilience and adaptability to enable effective delivery of outcomes in the changing contexts of uncertainty.

⁵ Positive expectations are about stakeholders expecting to benefit from successful outcomes, while some stakeholders may be adversely affected by outcomes, such as in the instance where they may lose their jobs through replacement by technology.

⁶ More information about the theory of *Stakeholder Circle*® and how it can be used to develop a current picture of who is important and how best to engage these stakeholders can be found at <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-SHM.php>. A software tool is available to assist in gathering data about the stakeholder community can also be found here.

- Re-negotiating work-life balance⁷.

Achieving success in these areas will depend even more on identification of stakeholders, knowing their expectations, and applying more disciplined and nuanced communications for fully engaging them. Inevitable change post-pandemic must include consultation with the stakeholders, provision of information about the reasons and decisions for these changes accompanied by seeking and acknowledging feedback from those affected by the changes⁸. Effective communication is sharing of information in both directions.

Effective communication the only tool for engaging stakeholders

Identification and prioritization processes to engage stakeholders requires planning, implementation, and measurement of effectiveness of the communication designed to achieve engagement.

The Communication Plan

An effective communication plan for each stakeholder defines:

- The *purpose* of the communication: what is to be achieved through the communication,
- The most *appropriate message* - its format and delivery method,
- *Targeted* communications to meet the expectations and requirements of the stakeholder and the capacity and capability of the team.

Based on each stakeholder's unique engagement profile, a communication plan can be developed. The communication plan should contain:

- *Mutuality*: How the stakeholder is important to the activity AND the stakeholder's *stake* and expectations,
- *Influence*: How the stakeholder may influence the success (or failure) of the work or its outcomes
- *Receptiveness*: How willing is the stakeholder to receive information about progress or issues.

Strategies for delivering the message are an important part of the communications plan:

- *Who* will deliver the message?
- *What* the message will be: regular activity reports or special messages?

⁷ Suggestions for these reforms are outlined in the third paper in this series.

⁸ This topic will be covered in the fifth and final paper in this series – *Rethinking change*

- *How* it will be delivered: formal and/or informal, written and/or oral, technology of communication – e-mails, written memos, meetings?⁹
- *When*: how frequently it will be delivered, and over what time frame (where applicable)?
- *Why*: the purpose for the communication: this is a function of mutuality – why the stakeholder is important for activity success, and what the stakeholder requires from the activity?
- *Communication item*: the information that will be distributed – the content of the report or message.

Other considerations, such as crafting of messages that meet the specific needs of different individual or groups are fundamental to effective communication:

- The sponsor or other executive-level stakeholder may require concise summary information such as exception reports, AND early warning of potential negative events or actions that could embarrass that stakeholder. The key intent is to ensure that there are no surprises. During the pandemic, there was constant two-way information exchange between the authorities and leaders of business.
- Middle managers who supply resources need time frames, resource data, and reports on adherence to plans and effectiveness of resources provided, more comprehensive information.
- Staff working on the activity and other team members need detailed but focused information that will enable them to perform their activity roles effectively, such as Earned Value reports. During the lockdowns and the further stages of the pandemic workers were anxious for any information to reassure them, to reduce anxiety, to advise on survival payments.
- Other staff need progress updates of information on how it will affect their own work roles; and
- External stakeholders will also require targeted updates on aspects of the activity relevant to their interests in the activity, its deliverables, its impact, its progress.

Other factors may act as barriers to effective communication. Awareness of these factors and their consequences should drive the timing content and context of the communication. They are broadly summarized:

⁹ The emergence of the electronic communications , especially emails in organizations and social media in our personal lives will be discussed in more detail in the final paper of this series – *Rethinking change*.

- Personal reality: conscious and unconscious thought processes will influence how individuals ‘hear’ and process any information they receive – how they perceive their environment. For any individual, reality is understood through unique filters of experience, knowledge, and interests. Each person constructs a different reality; he or she may describe the same scene in totally different ways¹⁰. The brain comprehends and interprets the world according to its own wiring, selecting and ignoring information depending on the experience, knowledge and interests that have created that unique reality.
- Personality: personality differences may also dictate the *how* and *what* of effective communication. Each personality type exhibits distinct patterns of thoughts, motives, values, mindsets, attitudes, and behaviours, often inherited. A stakeholder may respond best to information presented to match their preferences: some people just want the facts, with enough supporting information to provide credibility, some people just want the headlines while others want a lot of detail, others may want the information in story form.
- Environmental and personal distractions will include effects of external issues such as pandemics and other global events; noise – either excessive environmental sound or an overwhelming load of useless and unusable data; lack of interest, fatigue, or personal issues. There can be no doubt that the chaos, confusion and uncertainty of the weeks, months and now years of pandemic life have been distracting and detrimental to clear transmission and reception of information.

Cultural diversity within a project team can take the following forms:

- Generational – a team may contain representatives from as many as four different generational groups: baby boomers, Gen X, Y, Z, or Millennials. Generational differences may cause misunderstandings based on communication preferences, attitudes to work, and even language. This aspect of culture was clearly a communication issue during each stage of the pandemic – Different age groups reacted differently to the uncertainty of each phase¹¹ and to each type of restriction. Older residents were more fearful of the consequences of catching COVID and mostly followed the health advice (whatever the advice happened to be) while the younger age groups treated the mandates as advice and did not necessarily follow the ‘rules’.

¹⁰ (Horowitz, 2013. *On Looking: About Everything There is to See*. London. Simon & Schuster) describes what happens when she turned a daily walk around the block with her dog into an exercise of perception. She by invited people from different professions to walk with her and describe what they saw. Each one of them drew her attention to different aspects of the same pathways she had walked on many times before: psychiatrist, economist, her 19-month-old son, an architect, and eight others. They all described aspects of that block that she could never have imagined; it was outside her experience.

¹¹ This was described in the first paper of this series – *Rethinking Uncertainty*.

- Gender - differences in the way that men and women transmit and choose to interpret information. Neither of these ways of communicating is necessarily superior to the other – this is just how men and women have been socialized. But it also explains why there can be misunderstandings in both formal and informal conversations, where men try to *fix* a problem by giving advice, and women want to talk about the problem without necessarily needing the advice men bestow. These misunderstandings will also explain the impression that many male managers have of the linguistic styles of their female colleagues. For example, women ask more questions, usually for clarification or deeper understanding: this has been interpreted by male managers as not knowing enough (Tannen, 1995).¹² (Tannen, 2013) describes these differences as:
 - *Report talk*: – the way that men communicate both formally and informally, transferring information to establish and maintain status that displays their abilities and knowledge.
 - *Rapport talk*: the way that women communicate both formally and informally to build and maintain connections, first validating the relationship to build rapport and then dealing with any business.

- Industrial or professional - Managers; professionals (engineers, accountants, and teachers); and operational personnel. They will have different communication styles, language, and approaches to work.

- National – consider a mix of Asian, Anglo-American, and Latino cultures – here also there will be different communication styles, language, and approaches to work. The population of Australia is extremely diverse with representatives from many global communities and language groups. So not only was language a barrier to communication, the cultural background of first culture often meant unexpected interpretations or incomprehension of the messages.

- Organizational - Corporations, Government departments, and Universities will all have different structures and focus. Different organizations will display different characteristics, depending on their structure and mission: corporations (for profit); Not for Profit, such as charities; and Government Departments or agencies. Within these characteristics will be other distinguishing features based on:
 - Risk tolerance – are they risk avoiding or risk seeking?
 - Charter – are they entrepreneurial or public-service oriented?
 - Who benefits – shareholders? Selected groups of society? Or the public at large?

¹² And there is the story of how women are willing to ask for directions, whereas men are reluctant to do so.

- Product orientation – manufacturing, product sales, service providers, or a mixture?
- National, regional, or multinational?

Communication with stakeholders requires consideration of all the differences in culture already outlined.¹³ The experiences of information flows throughout the pandemic have provided directions for effective communications in organizational and project life post-pandemic.

Adapting organization communication to project ‘life after COVID’

The descriptions of management of information to Australia throughout the pandemic identified some good information but also some less effective and even outright failures. The Governments and other authorities learned from their failures and in the phase of ‘living with COVID’ communication efforts became more effective. What authorities, Governments, community leaders and business leaders must now do is to apply these learnings and communication techniques afresh to how organizations manage the changes to how we work, how we manage projects, and even how we live post-pandemic.

The work of project management is complicated¹⁴ and often complex¹⁵, due to the combination of technical and operational intricacy within the web of relationships of the stakeholder community. Uncertainty and unpredictability are always present in projects, but now with experiences of the disruptions of the pandemic many project workers are more sensitive to uncertainty. They revisit those feelings of uncertainty in the new or emerging ‘normal’ post-pandemic.

Conclusion

Organizations everywhere are struggling with the requirements of resumption of project planning and delivery. They need to prevail over the global threats of staff and material shortages, the demographic changes to the project workforce and the general reluctance of project teams members to resume full-time face-to-face modes of working. These are complex issues for organizations and may need courage to introduce innovative flexible work modes and to introduce new people strategies to acquire and retain project workers. It is a great opportunity for innovation and flexibility, and will require a measure of audacity from often conservative organizations. To achieve these ambitious goals, they must ensure that communication and people management strategies match any changes they plan to introduce, and even more important, to ensure adequate consultation with their people. The final paper in this series will discuss strategies for effective

¹³ See Bourne, L. 2012 *Making Projects Work*. For detailed information on all aspects to consider when preparing for targeted information

¹⁴ Complicated = a large number of interconnected and interdependent parts.

¹⁵ Project work is complex if it consists of many interdependent parts each of which can change in ways that are not totally predictable and which can then have unpredictable impacts on other elements that are themselves capable of change

change to incorporate as many of the ideas outlined in these first four papers as feasible short-term, medium-term and longer-term. Change is bound to happen post-pandemic and organizations that recognize and embrace change will be more successful than those who don't.

About the Author



Dr. Lynda Bourne

Melbourne, Australia



Lynda Bourne DPM, FACS is a senior management consultant, professional speaker, teacher and an award-winning project manager with 50 years professional industry experience. She has been focussed on the delivery of stakeholder management and other project related consultancy, mentoring and training for clients world-wide.

She has presented at conferences and seminars in South America, Europe, Russia, Asia, New Zealand and Australia to audiences of industry leaders and project managers in the IT, construction, defence and mining industries and has been keynote speaker at meetings and workshops within organisations in the finance and utilities sector.

In 2010 she was engaged as visiting professor at EAN University, Bogota, Colombia, teaching leadership in the Masters of PM Program for five years.

Most recently she was a member of the Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, lecturing in IT management subjects, in particular, stakeholder management, communication and leadership.

Lynda Bourne has authored the following books:

- *Stakeholder Relationship Management: A Maturity Model for Organisational Implementation*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2009)
- *Project Relationship Management and the Stakeholder Circle: A guide for developing stakeholder management maturity in organisations* (2010)
- *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders*, (Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot - 2011)
- *Making projects and programs work: What really matters for achieving successful project and program outcomes* (2015)

She can be contacted at lynda.bourne@gmail.com