Role, Challenges and Limitations of Communications in Project Stakeholder Management and Engagement [1, 2]

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Abstract

Communication persistently ranks amongst the top critical success factors identified in the project literature across the globe and over time. Its importance is universally acknowledged by project practitioners as well as project theoreticians. No project can be accomplished successfully in the absence of good communication which is sustained over the entire project lifecycle.

Communication assumes added importance and criticality with increasing project size and technical, organizational, social and environmental complexity, and number of stakeholders. Yet, communicational deficiencies continue to seriously overshadow many projects resulting for them, inter alia, in cost overruns and schedule delays, unwanted scope modifications, staff demotivation, damage to the project image and a significantly higher risk of project failure. Hence, a serious effort must be made to explore and critically analyze from the perspective of projects the specific role communication plays on projects, the myriad accompanying challenges and limitations it poses, as well as ways and means by which these identified challenges and limitations can, if not overcome, at least be managed effectively.

For this study the authors have reviewed the available literature on over twenty large-scale projects primarily in construction and civil infrastructure development. Several interviews with project practitioners were also conducted to determine their views on communication in projects of this project category. Projects in this project category

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possess the advantage of typically having a comparatively very sizeable and diverse community of primary and especially secondary stakeholders which necessitates the creation of complex communicational systems and which from research perspective opens up the opportunity for gaining more interesting insights through an in-depth explorative study and analysis.

The authors examine the communication which occurs between projects and their stakeholders and discuss key factors which influence communication effectiveness. Various practical and specific suggestions as to how to the quality of communication on projects can be significantly improved will be discussed in a follow-up study. Project practitioners can benefit through the insights on communication dynamics offered by this study which can help them shape their communication systems in a stakeholder-responsive manner in order to satisfy their stakeholders as well as to enhance project effectiveness and operational efficiency.

Introduction

Communication has been termed the 'blood' of projects by some and the 'glue' which holds a project together by others. It is an integral component and universally acknowledged critical success factor of every project regardless of project location, size, complexity and type. Its criticality has been repeatedly highlighted in numerous project surveys undertaken from time to time across the globe in project categories as diverse as IT and construction, or events and new product or service development, where respondents rank factors in order of their impact and influence on project success. Communication, directly or indirectly, appears in most of these surveys under the top ranked identified factors, oftentimes sitting higher up the ranking ladder then the technical difficulties or environmental challenges and complexities encountered by projects. Indeed, long is the list of projects that over time failed to achieve the degree of success which was expected of them or which were forced into premature termination caused by serious experienced communicational deficiencies or shortcomings.

Communication works in tandem with the activities of cooperation, coordination and collaboration. Effective and sustained cooperation, coordination or collaboration between project stakeholders, which indisputably are essential for successfully undertaking any project, are impossible without adequate communication between them. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that the better the quality of communication is on a project over time, the higher is the likelihood that the project operational performance will exhibit greater efficiency and the project will deliver better results subsequent to its completion.

Despite its profound significance, communication on projects can even at the best of times be fraught with considerable difficulties, issues and challenges. Communication on projects has traditionally been regarded as a 'soft' area whose undertaking and management is usually perceived as being easy or comparatively much simpler to perform than complex technical tasks and activities. Consequently, on many occasions, inadequate thought, effort and planning goes into project communications with disastrous results.

For projects falling in the category of large construction and civil infrastructure and development, communication assumes a special role and significance. Hundreds of billions of Dollars are invested in such projects globally every year. Every nation's economic development and growth, investment prospects and social prosperity, depends to a large extent on them. Their immense technical complexity and high cost notwithstanding, such large or mega undertakings are typically characterized by having enormous stakeholder communities, both primary and (especially) secondary, which usually are extremely diverse and heterogenous. Communicating with all these stakeholders adequately, appropriately, ethically and amicably over a time horizon which for such projects often can span several years, and in constant pursuit of a win-win situation for both the project and its stakeholders, may present great difficulties and require considerable effort, planning, ingenuity and cost but it is critically important and the onus lies primarily with the projects to ensure that effective and efficient communication systems with stakeholders are continually functional. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; communication must take place in accordance with the respective needs, wants and requirements of stakeholders and must be sufficiently flexible to quickly and fully adapt to situational changes which may, and in practice usually do, occur over time.

In analyzing the complex role, challenges and limitations of communication on large construction and civil infrastructure development projects it is instructive to distinguish between the two main stakeholder groups on projects i.e., the primary and secondary stakeholders. Communication between both stakeholder groups and the project throughout its lifecycle is obviously crucial but the communication approach and intent for either group will necessarily differ significantly. Therefore, for analytical purposes, the primary and secondary stakeholders must be considered separately.

Primary Stakeholders: Role, Challenges and Limitations of Communication

Primary stakeholders encompass all entities ranging from individuals to organizations and even to governments that have a contractual obligation to, or a legal responsibility, towards the project. On large construction and civil infrastructure development projects primary stakeholders typically include entities such as the project manager and team, project client, project sponsor, financers, consultants, contractors and sub-contractors, vendors and a host of other individuals, groups and organizations providing tangible or intangible inputs to the projects. All of them have specified roles and responsibilities to fulfill, which for some may extend over the entire project lifecycle or for others restrict itself to distinct phases of it. Their inputs may range from the supply of nuts and bolts to provision of sophisticated state-of-the-art equipment and machinery, or performance of routine services and tasks to provision of complex knowledge-based inputs. Their involvement in the project is normally voluntary, often follows a competitive selection process, and assures them worthwhile gains which may not only be monetary in nature but can include non-monetary benefits such as experiential and reputational gain, professional networking opportunities, and exposure to new or innovative processes, methods, technologies, and cultural environments. For the project workflow to progress smoothly, all primary stakeholders must effectively and continually cooperate, coordinate

and collaborate with each other. Communication is the foundation of this. Any communication-related issues which arise between stakeholders over the course of the project lifecycle can at best cause relatively brief and resolvable conflicts between them or, at worst, these may damage the project through resultant cost overruns, schedule delays or, in the most extreme case, even pose an existential danger to the projects.

Increasing numbers of primary stakeholders on projects tends to increase their communicational challenges. This is normal and to be expected considering that the entities are usually independent from each other and have their own distinct approach to communication. Some stakeholders may be comparatively more open, quicker and responsive than other stakeholders who may need prompting and be less forthcoming. With globalization and the increasing internationalization and complexification of construction and civil infrastructure development projects that has been witnessed in the past two or three decades the inter-cultural dimension, for instance, has assumed great importance on projects. Though a multicultural project setting offers appreciable context-specific benefits, communication between stakeholders across social (and organizational) cultural boundaries undeniably presents its own set of complex issues and challenges and needs to be more researched, better understood and accordingly managed in order to reduce risk and prevent serious damage to projects.

Because communication constitutes the prerequisite for cooperation, coordination and collaboration its importance for the project is, as emphasized repeatedly above, absolutely crucial. Effective communication between primary stakeholders increases the likelihood of them achieving the project goal within its constraint framework. Hence, projects need to focus very carefully on their communication systems to ensure that they function to both maximum effectiveness and efficiency. With this purpose in mind projects typically develop a comprehensive project communication plan as part of their project master plan in which, inter alia, the communication principles, guidelines, objectives, strategies, targets, channels, preferences, content, frequency etc. are documented in detail. Like the other project plan documents, communication plans are dynamic in nature and may undergo several revisions over time to reflect changing stakeholder communication needs as the projects progress over their respective life-cycles. Communication plans serve as a valuable reference for primary stakeholders and to which they are expected to refer and closely adhere to throughout their projects.

At the same time, even the best conceived project communication plans cannot realistically deliver optimal or even excellent results in the absence of a bundle of performance-assuring pre-conditions which relate not only to the project communication system itself but also to the information which underlies the system. In other words, it makes no sense for projects to manage their communication well without concurrently managing information well too. Communication and Information go hand in hand; they basically represent the two sides of a coin. One is useless without the other. Primary stakeholders need information to fulfill their roles, responsibilities and obligations on projects and to perform their respective tasks and actions and to make necessary decisions, and this information is transmitted to them through communication. Deficiencies present either in the

information which stakeholders send or receive and/or in the way this information is communicated by or to them may have potentially serious repercussions for the project as empirical evidence has on numerous occasions aptly demonstrated.

Hence, the acquisition of 'quality information' is a prerequisite for effective communication. Quality is a complex, multi-dimensional concept which finds broad application in all technical and managerial domains and the project information domain offers no exception. To fulfill the requirement of being high quality – and consequently being of high value and utility to project stakeholders - all project information must simultaneously satisfy the following set of criteria:

- Accuracy (the information is grounded in facts)
- Relevance (the information satisfies stakeholder need)
- Specificity (the information provides useful details or insights)
- Completeness (the information does not omit any useful/important details)
- Currentness (the information is up-to-date in all respects)
- Reliability (the information stems from a trustworthy source or sources)
- Comprehensibility (the information is understandable to stakeholders)
- Permissibility (the information was acquired through ethical/legal means)

Fulfilling all above-mentioned criteria over the course of a project lifecycle is, even in the best of circumstances, very difficult to achieve in practice. However, any deficiency in the quality of information caused by non-fulfillment of one or more of these criteria will automatically reduce the efficacy of the project's communication system, regardless of how well it is designed, configured and implemented. An additional constraining factor is that the acquisition, analysis and assessment, cataloguing, storage, and dissemination of information, and creation of a purpose-specific robust infrastructure for it, can also be a costly and challenging undertaking on large complex construction and civil infrastructure development projects where heaps of information tend to be generated on a regular basis.

Deficiencies in the way information is communicated to project stakeholders may also seriously diminish its utility. On large construction and civil infrastructure development projects, several common communication impediments may crop up which negatively affect the process of information transmission, namely:

- *Overcommunication* which manifests itself in excessive and too frequent communication between stakeholders resulting in wastage of time and effort spent analyzing or assessing unnecessary or redundant information and which distracts stakeholders from their project work.

- *Undercommunication* which is the opposite of overcommunication and which manifests itself in information needed by stakeholders not being conveyed to them with the consequence that actions and decision-making on their part gets delayed or is of a lessor standard than would have otherwise been possible.

- *Non-Communication* which is the complete absence of communication which can lead to lack of awareness by stakeholders of project situations and developments and in consequence of which they may become very concerned, demotivated, stressed and apprehensive or hesitant to act or take decisions.

- *One-Sided Communication* which is the communication of information from stakeholders to other stakeholders but without the expected reciprocity.

- *Miscommunication* which represents the gap between what the project stakeholders communicating information actually meant or intended the information to convey and what the stakeholders who received that information actually understood from it.

- *Untimely Communication* which is the communication of information to stakeholders before or after that point in time at which they need it and as a result of which the quality of actions performed and decisions taken by them are adversely affected.

- *Misdirected Communication* which is the communication of information mistakenly to stakeholders who do not need it instead of communicating it to the stakeholders who do need and are expecting that information.

The information-communication nexus outlined above gives rise to four distinct scenarios on a project. Under the best-case scenario, high-quality information is communicated effectively to project stakeholders without occurrence of any of the communication impediments outlined above. Obviously, this would be immensely beneficial for projects but on large and complex ones is practically impossible to sustain throughout their lifecycles. Conversely, under the worst-case scenario, information exhibiting serious quality shortcomings is also communicated ineffectively to project stakeholders (i.e., some or all of the communication issues outlined above occur) and this can damage the project, especially if no strong remedial measures are promptly adopted. In between these two extreme case scenarios lie two further possible scenarios, namely, information of high quality is communicated ineffectively or information of low quality is communicated effectively. Both can also seriously erode project operational performance. From the authors' interviews with project practitioners, it appears that on large construction and civil infrastructure development projects they usually are relatively more commonly encountered than the two extreme case scenarios. It can be assumed that all four scenarios will occur, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes separately, whereby their frequency, intensity and consequences are determined by the prevailing project situation and circumstances as well as by contextual factors. Projects are hence challenged to carefully and continually monitor and assess their information and communication systems and take swift and decisive corrective action if and whenever the need should arise.

The causes of communication issues on large construction and civil infrastructure development projects are numerous and have been quite extensively researched. Most of

them fall in the social, psychological, cultural, technical and institutional categories. Sometimes individuals, groups and organizations working on projects fail to realize and appreciate the criticality of their role as communicators. Oftentimes this may be attributed not to a lack of interest or motivation on their part but instead simply to a lack of awareness, encouragement or training. Research reveals that most people by nature are introverts and some may be hesitant to go the extra mile to interact or communicate with others unless circumstances literally compel them to do so. A lack of trust, failure to develop relationships or emergence of personal antagonism between stakeholders may also constitute a serious obstacle to communication. And as often observed on projects, stakeholders deliberately may deliberately withhold information in the expectation or hope that uncomfortable situations or problems which have cropped up will resolve themselves automatically if left concealed and unaddressed. With globalization and the internationalization of project supply chains, it is not uncommon nowadays to encounter stakeholders from several countries and cultures participating in large construction and civil infrastructure development projects. The consequent level of cultural interfacing occurring is also high. Multicultural participation and the diversity which normally accompanies it can bring major benefits as well as pose daunting challenges for projects. It is widely known that approaches and attitudes to communication, professionalism and ethics varies across cultures, and it is not unreasonable to assume that such differences are carried over into the project environment. This can precipitate significant conflicts and friction between stakeholders on occasions. Furthermore, in a multicultural and multilinguistic project environment misunderstandings may arise inadvertently in communication between stakeholders which, if left unaddressed or poorly managed, can pose a serious challenge for projects and can adversely affect their performance.

Projects can adopt many measures, ranging from the simple to the highly complex, to significantly improve the quality of communication. Such measures will be discussed in detail in a future symposium paper by the authors.

Secondary Stakeholders: Role, Challenges and Limitations of Communication

Secondary stakeholders, unlike the primary stakeholders, have no contractual obligation or legal responsibility to projects. Since they have no specified roles and responsibilities they are not subject to the instructions and formal control of project executives. On projects involving the development of large tracts of space, as is customary in large or mega-scale construction and civil infrastructure development schemes, the number of secondary stakeholders numerically exceeds the number of primary stakeholders manifold. Secondary stakeholders are also comparatively much more heterogenous and span a broad array of disparate entities, inter alia, individuals, families and local communities, associations and civic organizations, businesses, environmentalists, civil society organizations, social activists, media, academia, government agencies and, for some projects, even the general public and foreign governments.

Another key distinguishing feature of secondary stakeholders which sets them fundamentally apart from the primary stakeholders is that whereas the latter can all be

presumed to be supportive of projects because of their voluntary participation in, and their contractual obligations or legal responsibilities towards them, this presumption does not necessarily hold true for the former. Depending on their circumstances some secondary stakeholders may be fully supportive of the project, others may not. Some secondary stakeholders may in fact be actively and vehemently opposed to projects and continuously strive to prevent them from achieving their goals or at least endeavor to cause maximum damage for them in pursuit thereof. Long is the list of large construction and civil infrastructure projects across the globe which over time have experienced cost overruns or schedule delays, unwanted changes to their scope of work or, in more extreme cases, even premature termination because of hostile secondary stakeholder actions. The power of secondary stakeholders to influence projects comes through the availability of various 'options' at their disposal which they can utilize to further their self-interests and which, depending on their predisposition, may be either beneficial or detrimental for the projects. Depending on context, the number of secondary stakeholder options can vary. Options which can adversely affect projects range from the very soft at the one end of the spectrum to the very hard (and sometimes downright illegal) at the other end. An example of a soft option would be to publicly question the need for undertaking the projects or the supposed future benefits expected from them. An example of a hard option would be to approach the court for grant of a stay order halting construction work. In a previous UMD project management symposium paper specifically on the topic of stakeholder options the authors have comprehensively discussed using several examples the more frequently encountered options which hostile secondary stakeholders can utilize in their resistance to projects.

Consequently, the onus lies with projects to very carefully engage all their secondary stakeholders with a view to eliminate or, more realistically, to at least minimize their opposition on the one hand, while encouraging them to lend support on the other. Doing so is, off course, easier said than done given the heterogeneous nature of the secondary stakeholders and the multiplicity of their interests, both entity-specific and collective, viz-a-viz projects. Engaging secondary stakeholders effectively over a years-long project lifecycle is unquestionably an enormously complex, arduous and usually resource-intensive task but, if successful, can be immensely rewarding for the project. Nurturing trust between projects and their secondary stakeholders and building, consolidating and sustaining at least cordial if not amicable relationships with them over time is the prerequisite for effective engagement and this cannot be achieved without an appropriate and robust context-specific system of communication specifically designed with this purpose in mind.

Communication with secondary stakeholders is hence as important – and possibly an even tougher undertaking for projects - as it is for their primary stakeholders. The primary difference lies in the objective: whereas communication with primary stakeholders aims at striving to ensure the best possible cooperation, coordination and collaboration between them so that the project workflow can progress smoothly and efficiently towards achievement of the project goals under its given constraint framework, the communi-

cation with secondary stakeholders must aim at simultaneously generating support as well as reducing risk for the projects, in particular, by appeasing disgruntled, resentful or angry stakeholders whose consequent actions may seriously overshadow the projects or pose a serious existential risk to them. However, oftentimes project communication approaches and efforts directed at secondary stakeholders fall short as is witnessed frequently in practice.

In a previous UMD project management symposium paper, the authors argued that every stakeholder possesses a set of six dynamic attributes which ultimately determine how a stakeholder views a project. These attributes, grouped as binaries – motivation & concern, expectation & perception, and attitude & behavior - are universal and applicable on every project regardless of category, size, complexity level and so forth. They apply to primary stakeholders as much as they do to secondary stakeholders, irrespective of whether these entities are individuals, groups or huge organizations. Understanding where project primary and secondary stakeholders stand exactly in relation to these attributes over time is the key to managing them effectively. For secondary stakeholders this means that projects must first through research systematically collect and carefully analyze and assess 'quality' information which sheds light on their respective attributes in relation to the projects and on the basis of the acquired insights develop proactive and customized context-specific communication systems for these secondary stakeholders which aim to influence their behavior (which may be supportive, indifferent or hostile) in favor of the projects and which are sufficiently flexible to swiftly adapt to changing circumstances and situational developments. A good communication system must be designed with secondary stakeholder communication preferences in mind and exhibit bi-directionality in the sense that is not only continually disseminates information about the project to the secondary stakeholders but also continually receives an information stream from them, extracting fully any concerns, criticisms and positive and negative outlooks they may have about the projects, to enable project executives to utilize this input to implement any necessary remedial practical action. As a powerful trust- and relationship-builder communication can, if undertaken by the project effectively over time and in good faith and with sincerity, may often go a very long way towards allaying apprehensions, misconceptions and misperceptions secondary stakeholders may have about the project.

Communication hence constitutes the most fundamental secondary stakeholder behavior-influencing tool in a project's arsenal. At the same time project planners and executives must be cognizant of the limitations of relying solely on communication with their secondary stakeholders. As mentioned above, the quality of information which projects can access about their secondary stakeholders is crucial. Given the typically large number and diversity of the secondary stakeholders, the acquisition of much or even some of this information may prove to be a very difficult, costly and/or time-consuming pursuit. Furthermore, processing and extracting meaningful insights from the information requires considerable analytical skills, knowledge, ability and experience. And even possession of quality information and the best communication sustained over the entire project lifecycle cannot be expected to completely pacify hostile stakeholders who in

consequence of the project will, or who perceive they will, inevitably experience a resultant project-induced net loss of a financial, material, health, social, psychological and/or other nature. On construction and civil infrastructure development projects this is usually the bitter reality for many secondary stakeholders. By way of fair compensation and to mitigate opposition projects can, as has been observed in many instances, offer their secondary stakeholders various incentives. These can take on many forms on projects, for example, donation of computers and books for local schools and grant of educational stipends and grants for students, provision of crucial medical equipment to local hospitals and clinics, and prioritization of local businesses in project procurements and local residents for employment on the project. Some projects have invited their secondary stakeholders to exercise 'participatory' rights in certain project phases and in some (albeit rare) cases, have even offered secondary stakeholders a partnership opportunity in the projects which entitles them to a share of project earnings and profits.

Concluding Remarks

Communication constitutes the basis of interaction between projects and their stakeholders, both primary and secondary. Its importance cannot be overestimated. Communication effectiveness may be reduced by several factors, notably the quality of the information which it conveys and by the communication process itself. While communication is critically important for the project in its dealings with both its primary as well as its secondary stakeholders, the basic objective of communication differs in each stakeholder category. For primary stakeholders project communication strives to ensure that all these entities work together efficiently and systematically towards accomplishment of the project goal. For secondary stakeholders project communication is based on a careful generation of insights and clear understanding about these entities in order to predict how they will or may behave towards the projects over their lifecycles and seeks to influence their behavior especially with a view to reducing or eliminating the risk of damage which can result to the projects from hostile stakeholder action.

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