

TRAINING 101

Stop Project Shutdown

How to keep your project on track by breaking down the barriers to communication.

By Michael Thomas

Illustration by Claudia Newell

You've been appointed to lead a high-stakes project for your company. Perhaps the project is to expedite and smooth the integration of two merged companies and their divergent cultures. Or maybe it's to implement a new performance measurement system. Whatever the focus, management expects you to create new cost efficiencies and revenue streams, and to do it within strict time and budget constraints.

To pull that off, you need effective communication with your team. You must coordinate with dozens of people who span various levels and departments, and have them work in concert to achieve objectives. The more people you must involve, the greater the odds of miscommunication, which can cause delays, run up costs, or even kill the project. How do you mitigate the risk of communication meltdowns and en-



Most project managers spend up to **90 percent** of their time communicating—to their team, **top management**, customers, and other project managers. Will your time be consumed with putting out **communication fires**?

sure effective communication to keep your project on track?

Conversation killers

The first step is to identify the barriers to effective communication. Analyze your team dynamics to determine whether any of the following barriers might impede your project's success.

Assumption without clarification. Do certain team members act as if they understand your instructions and expectations, but you find out later they aren't on the same page? That discovery signals you've assumed mutual understanding without seeking feedback and clarification from your team. As a result, you're having to continuously mop up mistakes and redirect the project to get things back on track.

Fear of reporting true status. You need to know when a project is behind schedule, is over budget, lacks resources, or is otherwise in trouble. If people who get behind schedule are ridiculed, they aren't going to give you a true status report. Cultivate a project environment in which team members feel comfortable reporting true conditions, not just what the project manager or sponsors want to hear.

Technical jargon. Imagine the communication challenges you face when your team is made up of IS and HR managers, accountants, and marketing professionals—all of whom

speak their own professional codes. Unless you establish and clarify a common language or at least define technical terms up front, you can expect communication problems.

Cultural differences. Such barriers are especially applicable in international projects and joint ventures. They include differences in language, gender, ethnic traditions, and corporate protocol.

Poor team chemistry. When you emphasize differences in rank or status and "talk down" to team members, you experience more barriers than if you foster a culture of openness and trust.

Preventative planning

One of the most effective ways to overcome barriers is to design a formal communication plan *before* you kick off a project. That plan will enable you to anticipate and diffuse potential problems before they erupt into crises that could push your project over schedule and over budget.

The project manager and team members should collaborate on the plan, with input from top management and customers. One way to get the process rolling is to set up a formal brainstorming session to hammer out the details of the communication plan. This exercise builds team morale and gives all members a sense of ownership.

Include these items.

Fundamentals. Your plan should answer a number of questions:

- Who needs what type of information?
- When do they need it?
- How should information be communicated—through in-person meetings, telephone calls, emails, formal reports, or memos?

Think of a project you are or will be managing:

- Which team members are responsible for reporting directly to you?
- In what fashion should they communicate status to you—via email, conference call, or team meeting?
- How often should they report status—daily, weekly, or biweekly?
- What main points do you expect a status report to cover?
- Do you want "percent complete" reports (such as, "I'm 60 percent done with my task") or estimate-to-complete reports ("I'm 10 hours from completion")?

Specifying communication details up front not only saves time and money, but it also enhances morale because team members understand clearly what's expected of them.

Task planning and management. You and your team should decide how specific tasks are assigned and monitored for progress. Project management software tools can help. Identify which software package you'll use, and ensure that all team members know how to use it. That fosters a spirit of collabora-

tion as each team member sees how he or she fits in the overall scheme.

Conflict resolution. When a project is in trouble, team members and sponsors tend to point fingers, bicker, and engage in other nonconstructive activities.

- What processes are in place so that team members can resolve their disagreements with each other, or you, quickly?
- Should team members approach each other or should they talk with you first?
- How should incidences be documented?

Having a plan keeps conflicts from festering and ultimately sabotaging success.

Change protocol. No matter how well you think through your overall project plan on the front end, things happen (such as team members being reassigned or software not working properly) that require you to make changes. Set up a change protocol in which you require all team members and stakeholders to document change requests, and review them for their possible effect on other project areas. That expedites reaching agreement among all parties when critical changes are required midstream.

According to the *Project Management Body of Knowledge*, a reference guide detailing the international standard for project management professionals, most project managers spend up to 90 percent of their time communicating—to their team, top management, customers, and other project managers. Will your time be consumed with putting out communication fires, or will you use it to maximize collaboration? Identifying potential barriers to effective communication and designing a formal plan to deal with those barriers helps you gain greater control over a project's outcome—and gives you peace of mind.

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