

Project Management: Communication IS Critical

You are the project manager responsible for relocating a manufacturing operation to another city. Your project plan has been carefully developed. Two days prior to the start of major equipment shipping, you notify purchasing to ensure the movers will be on-site, ready to load and transport. “It’s not going to happen!” you are told by purchasing. “This vendor requires two months lead time to schedule a move of this magnitude.”

You think: “I did the hard part – I put together a good project plan. Why didn’t I communicate it to the key support people?”

Time and time again in post-project assessments, project teams list communication as one of the most needed areas for improvement. Many times on troubled projects, project team members feel that if the communication had been better, the project would have run smoother.

Communication not only keeps everyone up-to-date on the project progress, but also facilitates buy-in and ownership of major project decisions and milestones. To ensure the success of a project much information, including expectations, goals, needs, resources, status reports, budgets and purchase requests, needs to be communicated on a regular basis to all the major stakeholders.

Project communication can often be more difficult due to challenges unique to project management. Many projects are short-term, and therefore project communication is temporary. This means that communications systems need to be established quickly in shorter periods of time. It is just as important to develop a communication plan for the project as it is to develop task planning.



Another challenge is that projects often include cross-functional or inter-organizational teams. Project teams are not normally natural teams and sometimes do not even reside in the same geographic location. Unique delivery methods and communication devices need to be utilized to overcome this challenge. But, it is possible to quickly implement effective communications that reach all affected parties, no matter how complicated or diverse your project team may be.

Cornelius & Associates' Project Communications Table

It is understood that better communication facilitates the success of a project, but how do you overcome obstacles and get better at communication? We have found one very successful tool to improve communication:

| Item/Delivery | Accountability | Objectives | Recipients | Frequency |
|---------------|----------------|------------|------------|-----------|
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The concept of our Project Communications Table is simple and it is fairly easy to construct, with a little planning. Mostly, the Table is a handy tool to help project team members not only understand their communications obligations, but also to provide team members with a plan to help actually carry out the necessary communications.

Before you think about creating a Project Communications Table, sit down and analyze who will be affected by this project – we call this the Stakeholder Analysis. Make a list of all project teams and team members, their supervisors, senior management, customer and end-users, and anyone else who may be affected by the project, such as external vendors or maybe the general public. Try to think long-term, over the life of the project, to ensure you have not secluded any one person or group of people who might not be affected in the project start-up. After you have completed the Stakeholder Analysis, you are ready to create the Project Communications Table.

There are six major categories of our Project Communications Table: communication device, vehicle, accountability, objectives, recipients (stakeholders), and frequency. We will take a look at each category individually, although, we recommend when planning a Project Communications Table for your project that you look at items line-by-line, instead of one category at a time.

Communication Item/Delivery

This category describes exactly which piece of information needs to be communicated and what vehicles, channels or methods project team members will use to carry out the necessary communications. Some examples of necessary information might include software updates, output from meetings (agendas, action items, handouts), a project calendar, expectations of external vendors, resource requests, and the list goes on. This list will vary widely depending on the scope of the project.

When it comes to delivery, there are many items to consider. Especially if you have a team that spreads across organizational or geographical boundaries, think “outside the box” for vehicles to deliver the communication. With the Internet and email, many creative solutions can be found, such as listservs, or a project intranet with postings, updates, and a message board. Seriously weigh the obstacles that confront all the stakeholders of your project before considering which vehicle to use for each communication item.

Communication Accountability

This category lists the name of the team member responsible for ensuring the communication occurs. Whether it is actually

initiating the communication or ensuring someone else does, this category establishes ownership of the communication and indicates specific people to hold responsible if the project suffers a delay due to a communication failure.

Communication Objective

This category describes what specific objective you will accomplish by delivering the communications device. For example, if you were held accountable for delivering a status report to project supervisors, your objective may be to communicate progress and the status of the project. Another possible objective for this scenario might be to review the recent project successes and short-term future targets. Analyze your project carefully: each piece of communication should have a specific objective. Otherwise, you will want to evaluate whether or not there is a true need for that communication.

Communication Recipients (Stakeholders)

This category describes which person or groups will be receiving the intended communication. Refer back to the Stakeholder Analysis you completed before working on the Project Communications Table. For each communication objective pinpoint all of the stakeholders who should be privy to this communication.

Communication Frequency

This category describes how often the specific communication will take place. When deciding this think about how often it is necessary to relay the information so that it is effective, without throwing your stakeholders into information overload.

An Example

Let's look at an example using all the categories to illustrate a complete line in the Project Communications Table. As the project manager, you have decided to create a steering team to help guide and lead the project. A line in your Project Communications Table might look like this:

| Item/Delivery | Accountability | Objectives | Recipients | Frequency |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|-----------|
| Detailed Project Status by Email | John Doe, Steering Team Sponsor | To review successes, progress and the short-term future. | Steering Team Members | Monthly |

Using Cornelius & Associates' Project Communications Table clearly defines who is responsible for what, where, when and how. This way there is no confusion and employees know absolutely what they are responsible for and how they are going to complete their tasks. Also, it is important to implement the communication plan that results from the Project Communications Table at the beginning of the project.

Breakdowns in communication are unacceptable reasons for project delays when some strategic thinking, planning and use of the Project Communications Table would reduce, if not eliminate, these problems. A little planning up front is worth its weight in gold.