



# Communicating Change

**H**ave you ever been given new software to use in your job, without really understanding why? Have you been asked to start using a new accounting method that you just don't understand? Have you ever gone months without any updates on some project that seemed to be a high corporate priority not that long ago?

If you have experienced any of these situations, then, unfortunately, you have been the recipient of a poorly communicated project.

Communication is the key to any successful project. We define communication as getting the right message to the right people at the right time, and making sure that the channels of communication remain open at all times during the project.

A project is well-communicated when end users are happy and excited about receiving the results of the project, and feel they will be able to effectively use those results to benefit them in their position. That only happens when a project manager has successfully delivered the project and the end users feel they aren't being forced to make a change against their will. As the old saying goes, "People don't resist change; they resist being changed."

"Perception is everything" when it comes to project success, says Vicki Winn, a business development manager with Sacramento, California-based CoreLogic, a First American company.

"Positive communication to the end user during the beginning of the project always opens the door for the user to hear, 'What is the project going to do for me?' I make sure that everyone—from the executive team to the end users—[is] on the same page. When I communicate, I try to create a visual that is going to be seen in the same manner, from the executives to the end users. It is very important that the people receiving the project feel as though the project is not going to put their current workload at risk and it is

going to make their job more efficient," Winn says.

It frequently has been said that communication takes up 90 percent of a project manager's time. To ensure project success, project managers need to make certain that the organization, corporate culture and compliance with state and federal laws encompassed by the project are all ready to embrace this new change as close to rollout as possible.

A vital part of a successful project is to create a project plan, or "communication

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strategy plan," that helps inform the project team and the stakeholders about expectations, goals, needs, status, policies, training and procedures, as well as getting people energized and interested in being part of the project. This plan also serves as a solution to minimizing adversity within a project, and ensuring that the end result of the project is approval by the end users.

### Communication strategy plan

The first step for any project plan is to create a list of all project teams and team members, their supervisors, senior management, customers and end users, and anyone else who may be affected by the project, such as external vendors or maybe even the general public. A communication strategy plan clearly defines who is responsible for the what, where, when and how of a project.

You may be asking yourself, "How do I communicate with the project members and let the recipients know what is hap-

pening on the project without divulging too much detail, while still keeping everyone interested in the project?" The answer lies in the communication strategy plan.

Now that you know the "who" of the project, you can start documenting the what, where, when and how of the project by adding the following information to your communication strategy plan:

- *Delivery items*—describe the information that needs to be communicated. This includes a detailed project status, high-level project status, budget, training, and the like.
- *Delivery method*—how the information will be disseminated. This could be in a meeting or via a memorandum, e-mail, newsletter, Webinar, presentation, and so forth.
- *Accountability*—establishes ownership of the communication.
- *Description*—the information being communicated, i.e., the message.
- *Distribution name and recipients*—who is involved in the communication process. This includes the identified stakeholders, such as project management and staff, customer management and staff, and external stakeholders.
- *Frequency*—when the information is to be communicated. It could be weekly, monthly, quarterly, as needed or as identified.

Which delivery method is best—written or oral? Is it better to give negative information in writing? These are questions that all project managers ask themselves.

More than half of all project communication is written, but many situations require good verbal interaction. Phone calls and Webinars are not as effective as face-to-face meetings; therefore, when it comes to communicating information that is not expected to be well-received, it is always better for management to deliver this information face-to-face.

Some communications can be expedited through a quick e-mail. Others require a spreadsheet, report, executive summaries or even a detailed PowerPoint®



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slideshow. The bottom line is that the project manager should use the most appropriate mode of delivery for the situation at hand, and balance that with the need to create excitement and energize the end users of the project.

### **Conflict management**

Projects are not easy to manage, and there will always be differences of opinion; therefore, a good project plan also includes a conflict-management strategy.

Project managers minimize conflicts and resolve issues through constant communication. In its 2003 *Project Communications Handbook*, the California Department of Transportation's (Caltran's) Office of Project Management Process Improvement describes a good method to resolve conflict, which includes the following steps:

- Acknowledge the conflict;
- Establish ground rules;
- Establish common ground and shared goals;
- Separate the problem from the people;
- Have the parties share collected data related to the conflict;
- Explore solutions, listing as many alternatives as possible;
- Evaluate solutions, looking for a win-win solution;
- Select the best solution; and
- Share the solution with the project stakeholders.

### **Change is constant**

Technology and business alike are seemingly in states of constant change, so there will always be an abundance of projects to be executed. The question every project manager needs to ask is: Have we done everything we can to keep company personnel well-informed, happy and excited about these changes, or do they feel as though they are being forced to change? Perception is everything, and good communication shapes perception.

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