FLOWING COMMUNICATION

It's the lubricant that keeps a project machine humming along

BY MATHUR RAVIKUMAR

Successful organizations resolve their cross-functional business issues using project teams with specific objectives and deliverables. Such project teams focus on subjects like introducing new products, resolving perennial production issues, achieving greater customer satisfaction, and so on. They may be called a task force, SWAT team, productivity team, or anything else that infers an aggressive approach to problem solving.

The communication within these teams should be structured according to company values and culture. This can be a difficult issue internally and even more difficult when external contractors or consulting firms are involved. Like most of us, team members are typically more skilled at the technical or administrative tasks than they are at effectively communicating at all levels within the organization. And external companies may bring a wealth of knowledge to the project but seldom understand their client's underlying power structure.

Remember your own experiences with project teams. Is it not true that successful projects always enjoyed excellent communication? Didn't team members understand the overall project goals and other stakeholders were allowed to voice opinions? Those affected by the project were kept in the loop and willingly did their part. Effective communication was the lubricant that kept the project flowing smoothly. I find it interesting that so vital an ingredient as communication really consumes so little time within the project. Effective communication is the thread that joins the pieces of the project, yet it typically consumes only a small percentage of the overall project effort. But this small percentage is, arguably, the most important piece of the project, whether the communication is purely internal or includes external companies.

Project communication consists of verbal and written communications aimed at keeping the project members informed. It also educates the employees of any eventual impact on their jobs and informs stakeholders about eventual benefits. It also spreads excitement about the project. We have all seen project plans in the form of PERT or GANTT charts that are distributed as the project status is updated. But there are more creative and effective ways of communicating this.

A large pharmaceutical company compiles an intranet guide for each of its projects. The guide contains project objectives, deliverables, team members, organizational structure and project calendar. Each member brings it to every meeting and writes his/her notes and actions which are subsequently added to the document. At any time, team members, employees and stakeholders can see the current status of the project, right down to the most trivial concern noted by a team member.

Another company held daily lunch meetings to keep team members updated as the project deadline approached. This assured nobody would have conflicting priorities and the short, informal communication overkill kept the team focused during the most critical period.

A project leader at a winery decided that only top ten, critical issues would be addressed in team meetings. He asked members to settle other issues in small subgroups. That eliminated distractions and allowed the leader to focus on the critical few issues.

A war room can bring peace. Office space dedicated to a specific project will provide team members an area that they can work surrounded by other team members, flow charts, project calendars, and the other accoutrements of the project. This allows team members to better focus on the project, particularly if they are just part time members.

There are project management software solutions that can be accessed through the Internet. This software can share schedules, maintain documentation, allow authorized individuals to update it, and will initiate email reminders. External vendors and consultants can also access the software if given security access. Eproject.com and projistics.com are two examples of Web sites that offer tools. There are also many professional service automation companies helping with such tools.

These are some of the more successful project communication techniques I have learned over many years and many projects. Please let me know if you've come across any interesting communication issues and how they were resolved. There are always lessons to be learned. ◆

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