Manage communication

Overview

Communication is key to successfully implementing any form of change in the workplace. This resource will focus on what good communication is and how to manage communication in the implementation of a project.

Key terms

Project Communication Management

Project communication management refers to the application of skills and techniques to ensure that all stakeholders and members of the project team receive required information when expected. It is about the gathering, generation, distribution and storage and disposal of all project information.

The importance of good communication

Managers need to earn the trust of staff and other stakeholders by their behaviour over time. They must be seen to be people of integrity who are respectful of the rights of others. Some writers would emphasise the need for transparency. This means that the manager is ‘up-front’ with employees, telling them the truth about current and future events and not holding back relevant information. For example, staff should be told if proposed changes will lead to job loses and, if this is the case, the way in which redundant staff will be treated.

Good communication is important when workplace change is being implemented. If the changes are major ones, it may be useful to add mentors and coaches to work teams. Their role will include interpreting management decisions and supporting team members in a time of change. They and others may need to take responsibility for determining the skills required by team members to successfully implement proposed changes and to work within a changed environment. This is important as workplace change often results in new skills being needed. Members of the existing workforce are
the obvious people to both implement changes and operate the systems
needed in the new environment.

Managers need to keep staff informed of the progress being made in
implementing workplace change. This is important for a number of reasons.

- **Firstly**, people do not like to be ‘kept in the dark’. Rumours fill the
gap left by the absence of real information.
- **Secondly**, staff want to know what is expected of them now and in
the future.
- **Lastly**, they want to know about their own future. In the absence of
facts, some will become pessimistic about their future and decide to
look for other employment. Those who are able to leave first are
likely to be the people with the greatest skills.

**Communication must be two-way.** It cannot be simply a process of
keeping stakeholders informed. Staff must be able to express their concerns
and get answers to the questions that may be troubling them. Also, they
should be encouraged to give feedback on their perceptions of what is
happening around them. The shop-floor view is valuable as these people
have the greatest knowledge of workplace procedures, suppliers and
customers.

Communication can be formal or informal. Formal communication takes the
form of meetings, possibly made up of nominees of stakeholders such as
management, workers and unions. They may meet at regular intervals, have
an agenda and be able to make decisions binding on the organisation.
Informal communication can take place anywhere and anytime. Such
meetings occur whenever stakeholders feel a need for them. They have no
agendas and no capacity to make decisions. However, they are important as
a means of exchanging facts and opinions.

**Research**

How are ideas exchanged between managers and employees in your
organisation?

**Think**

What are the barriers to excellent communication and how can these be
overcome?
Communication management

Effective communication is critical to the project's success. This is where strong general management skills in communication are applied.

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It is about the gathering, generation, distribution and storage and disposal of all project information.

Be aware that **too much information** is not necessarily a good thing. You need to make sure that those involved need just the right information in a timely fashion. Keep the following in mind:

- keep progress communication reports simple and easy to read as this is the key to effective communication
- make sure you distribute reports to the right people
- stakeholders have an interest in project costs as well as progress of the overall project activities
- project team members need to know task completions and progress against task lists.

All this needs to be done on a regular basis.

As an effective project manager try using the three 'w' **approach** to good communication skills, ie determine:

- **who** needs to know what
- **when** they need to know it
- **what** format they want the information in.

Consulting with stakeholders

Managers should be aware of those affected by proposed changes. These people and groups, whom we will call stakeholders, are the potential winners and losers in the change process. Important stakeholders in most change situations could include the following:

- Business owners: the people who actually own the businesses they run.
- Shareholders and investors: the companies and individuals who invest in businesses, both large and small.
- Employees: these are all the people who work for salaries, wages and commissions, from senior executives to low paid casual workers.
• Unions: representing employees, particularly workers for major employers such as education departments, health commissions and car manufacturers.

• Customers: the buyers of the output of businesses, be they products or services.

• Suppliers: the sellers of goods and services to businesses.

• Government departments and agencies: government, through agencies such as departments of Fair Trading, regulates the way in which businesses operate.

Managers need to be aware of the impact proposed changes will have on stakeholders. Ideally, managers should seek ways of creating ‘win-win’ situations. That is, situations in which everyone gains at the end of the change process. This means several things;

• The ‘ideal’ technical solution may not be practical because of the reaction of employees, their unions and other stakeholders.

• A brilliant marketing strategy may backfire if it so threatens competitors that they react by price cutting or similar strategies.

• Increased efficiencies may threaten jobs and bring an employer into conflict with unions.

Managers are showing real skills when successful in bringing about change without having a negative impact on stakeholders. We discuss this below.

Managers should, as part of planning change, identify the stakeholders affected. The needs of these people should be considered because disadvantaged stakeholders can block change.

This can be done in various ways. Dissatisfied shareholders can create arguments at annual general meetings. Dissatisfied workers can go on strike or simply work unenthusiastically (and therefore inefficiently) in implementing change.

Managers should try to understand why change is resisted. If this is not fully understood, they may fail in their attempts to win stakeholders over. There are many reasons for stakeholders resisting change. For example, employees and other stakeholders may resist change for anyone of the following reasons:

• they are happy with the present situation

• they fear the unknown

• the risks involved in the change proposal are unacceptable to them

• the changes may disadvantage them

• they do not trust management and their decision-making ability

• they are lazy.
Some of these objections may not be known to those initiating change. One reason for this may be that they have not communicated with stakeholders. There can be a number of reasons for this. One is that managers simply believe that they are the people who must make the decisions and that they should not be expected to consult with subordinates and other stakeholders. Another reason may be that managers may have been too busy to discuss their plans for change. Neither is a good reason for not communicating proposed change.

Managers must find ways to deal effectively with resistance to change. Consulting with stakeholders is obviously an important part of the process of addressing the issues raised by stakeholders. This can involve:

- involving stakeholders in the process of implementing change
- telling stakeholders the reasons for change having to be implemented
- listening to their concerns.

Following this, managers may have a better understanding of the issues affecting their initiatives. This may result in plans and decisions being changed to make them more acceptable to stakeholders. Alternatively, it may highlight the need to communicate the reasons for the proposed changes and the action needed to overcome resistance to change.

This may be difficult. Consider the strained relationship existing between the banks and many of their customers and the response Coles-Myer received to the withdrawal of a discount scheme for shareholders. It may also be costly when unions are able to negotiate packages for workers who become redundant following restructuring.

Feedback on how stakeholders feel about issues such as change can also be obtained through surveys and suggestion boxes. The difficulty with the latter is that it is often ignored by staff.

In some cases effective communication can result in feedback that suggests a proposed change will not deliver benefits. For example, customers may feel so strongly about proposed changes in the service offered by an organisation that gains will be more than offset by lost sales. Unpopular changes to suburban railway timetables can result in representations from politicians who are responding to complaints from constituents. The media can also become a reason for not proceeding with changes. The negative publicity in the media for oil companies over petrol price movements and for banks over the closure of branches in country towns are examples of areas where bad publicity could offset financial gain.

In all cases, problems between managers and business stakeholders can be reduced if a good understanding exists of the environment in which they are operating. This includes issues such as the workplace culture and changing community attitudes to issues such as pollution and quality.
Communication lines

Once you have assembled the staff for the project, the next task is to formalise the communication lines by means of an organisation chart that shows the hierarchy of all team members and the communication lines between each person and includes the project manager communication to the stakeholders. You'll develop a chart similar to that shown below:

Figure 1: A hierarchical organisation chart with communication lines

These communication lines give staff the flexibility to communicate with one another and within other teams, but they are designed to prevent staff from one team communicating to the senior staff members of another team. This ensures that requests from other teams are signed-off by appropriate senior staff members. On a large project strict communication lines ensure that communication is controlled to appropriate channels and prevents confusion and misinformation.
Methods of communication

The project manager usually implements strategies for informal and formal communications. This is done by specifying what communication methods will be acceptable during a project. Examples of informal communications may include:

- phone conversations
- e-mails
- memorandums.

Formal communications include:

- letters
- status review meetings, and
- formal presentations to the stakeholders.

But first you have to gather the information to build your reports. Generating the reports is a two-stage process. Firstly team members are given a template of a progress report that they are to complete according to a schedule. You will then summarise all the information on these periodic progress reports and submit the appropriate status report to key stakeholders and functional managers.

The reports are used to identify delays in activities, issues that team members are facing and also risks. From these inputs you can create contingency plans and make any necessary changes to the overall plan.

Communicating progress

Managers involved in implementing innovation and change need the ongoing commitment of all stakeholders. This means, in addition to addressing the issues raised by those with objections to the process, keeping staff and others committed through to completion.

Getting commitment means, among other things, communicating goals and, later on, progress towards reaching these goals. The way this is done depends on the type and number of stakeholders. Governments sometimes use national advertising campaigns to inform the community of important changes ahead. Such advertising campaigns are directed to winning support, neutralising opposition and informing the public of how they should prepare themselves for the changes. An example of such a campaign is the tremendously expensive campaign by the Australian Federal Government as part of introducing the Goods and Services tax.

Meetings and presentations can bring everyone together to hear reports from managers and to discuss the issues raised. A factory may use bar charts as a way of keeping staff members aware of progress towards a significant goal,
a process which can also highlight when, where and how every person involved must make their contribution.

Newsletters can make a similar contribution in informing people of change. In some cases, such as where local government plans to make changes that will affect many residents, public displays of information and community meetings serve a useful purpose.

Emails are increasingly used as a means of distributing information, as are videos and video conferencing.

Ideally all stakeholders should be able to get regular updates on progress towards goals. In this way unnecessary dissatisfaction and waning interest through lack of current information can be reduced.

Categories of communication

All communication falls into one of three categories:

- **essential communications**, which includes status reports, budget reports, legal issues, and personnel issues
- **should-know communications**, which includes project team assignments, work package contents, task schedules usually all for the project team.
- **promotional communication**, which is informational support for the project such as product branding, launch brochures and so on.

The communication plan

Good project communication management makes sure that you have a communication plan which contains:

- a list of all required communications
- the target for each communication
- the method of each communication
- the frequency of each communication
- who is responsible for each communication.

Armed with this plan and the appropriate communication lines you should be able to communicate to the satisfaction of all interested parties.

Adapted from TAFE Connect (2003) *Apply Skills in Project Integration 3655D* TAFE NSW; used with permission.