



Developing a Communication Plan

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Maximize productivity at team meetings
- ✓ Reward and motivate your team
- ✓ Develop and execute a communication plan
- ✓ Communicate with sponsors and executives more effectively

Developing a Communication Plan

The Five Components

To ensure your project’s success, you must include a communication plan as part of your initial project planning. This plan will help you keep everyone up-to-date with the information they need to know, and it will make sure the right people get the right information at the right time.

Your communication plan should have five essential parts: who, when, why, what, and how. As an example, let’s say that your project team is building a new widget for ABC Widgets.

Who

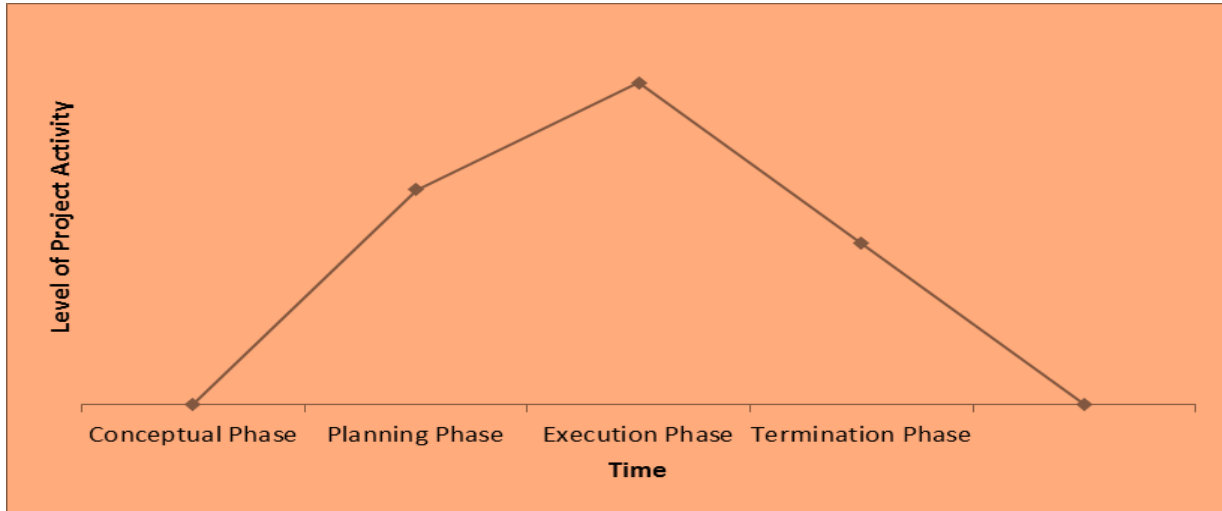
For the first part of the project plan, list the people that you will be communicating with.

Who	When	Why	What	How
Our customer (ABC Widgets)				
Design Engineers				
Project team				

The list above is very abbreviated; you must include **everyone** who will be involved in the project, from your project team, to consultants, to internal company departments such as human resources and marketing.

When

During what part of the project phase will you need to communicate with these various groups?



Who	When	Why	What	How
Our customer (ABC Widgets)	All phases			
Design Engineers	Conceptual and planning			
Project team	All phases			

Why

Ask yourself, why am I communicating with these people? What am I trying to accomplish?

Who	When	Why	What	How
Our customer (ABC Widgets)	All phases	Project is going well		
Design Engineers	Conceptual and planning	Keep them up to date		
Project team	All phases	Keep them up to date		

What

This is the section where you detail what you’re going to say to the various groups.

Who	When	Why	What	How
Our customer (ABC Widgets)	All phases	Project is going well	Project is on schedule; all is well	
Design Engineers	Conceptual and planning	Keep them up to date	Detail planning that has been done so far	
Project team	All phases	Keep them up to date	Detail accomplishments	

How

The “How” is a crucial part of your communication plan. You need to choose a medium that will get your message across in a way that they can understand. Below is a table of possible methods that you could choose and when they are appropriate.

Method	Recommended Use
E-mail	Informal status reports, meeting scheduling, newsletters
Paper	Newsletters and formal status reports
Face to Face	Status meetings, particularly when there are items to be discussed or issues to be resolved
Telephone	Useful when face-to-face contact is needed but there are barriers (time, distance) or for quick updates

Remember, you need to customize the medium for each person involved in the project. If you know a particular executive never returns phone calls, but always checks his e-mail, then that may be the best way to contact him.

Now let’s complete the “How” part of our communication plan.

Who	When	Why	What	How
Our customer (ABC Widgets)	All phases	Project is going well	Project is on schedule; all is well	Monthly status meetings Weekly status report (e-mail)
Design Engineers	Conceptual and planning	Keep them up to date	Detail planning that has been done so far	Weekly status meetings Daily status report (e-mail or telephone)
Project team	All phases	Keep them up to date	Detail accomplishments so far	Weekly status meetings

Tips

You may want to develop templates for status reports, newsletters, or other communications that you plan to issue. This will help your communications stay consistent and professional.

It is essential to stay organized. Keep documents like your project plan, risk identification list, and change requests all in one place, so that when someone asks you a question, you can easily retrieve the answer. Some project managers develop a one-page fact list for easy reference.

Set up group e-mail lists to save time and make sure you don't forget anyone.

A Word about Rumors

Rumors can be a project manager's worst enemy. If left unmanaged, they can destroy your project and your career. It is essential to face rumors head-on.

There are a few practical steps that you can take early on in your project. First, ask people that you trust (such as friends in the office and core team members) to keep an ear to the ground. What are people saying about your project? Second, develop your communication plan and use it well. If you make sure you share plenty of information at the appropriate times to the right people, there should be very little basis for rumors.

If you do hear a rumor that is true, make sure that your team (including the executives and the project sponsors) see what you are doing to correct the issue. Also, ensure the issue is addressed openly in your status meetings.

If the rumor is false, you still need to address it. Make a point of addressing the non-issue in your status meetings with your project team, your executives, and your sponsor. Make sure that you demonstrate integrity in your actions: be where you say you will be, do what you promise to do, and arrange resources that people need. Your consistency and professionalism are additional ways to keep rumors at a minimum. For example, if a rumor is going around that your project is behind schedule, you could place a quick phone call to your project sponsor just to let them know that everything is on track, or any delays that you are encountering.

Communication Essentials

Project managers are the key to keeping communication flowing between their team, manager, and any external customers or agents who will be affected by this project.

How can you let others know of changes that affect the plans?

How can you communicate progress and motivate others to continue giving their best? How can you motivate others to be as interested in the project at hand as you are?

How can you ask for information from people who have special knowledge or expertise?

How do you hold meetings and make sure your manager has the time to meet with you?

Case Study

You are sitting in your office one Friday afternoon in September when Barbara Jones, the CEO of your company, comes rushing in. She has just come out of a budget meeting. Due to a cash flow problem, the budget for this year’s annual party has been drastically reduced to \$17,500 from \$75,000. Before, she had hired an outside consultant to do the work, but that’s no longer affordable, so she wants you to plan the party for January 1, under the budget allocated.

Task One

Develop a preliminary communication plan for this project. Make sure you try to think of everyone who might be involved in the project.

Who	When	Why	What	How

Task Two

What kinds of rumors might circulate during the project?

How might you handle those?

Communicating with Sponsors and Executives

Communication Excellence

Getting Started

During your project, it may be easy to forget about your project sponsor. However, they are the person providing the resources, and if they pull the plug halfway through, your project will be doomed. Likewise, you want to keep the company executives interested, as they may have control over the budget, resources, or even your position and salary in the company.

When you are assigned the project, you should schedule separate meetings with the sponsor and the executives. (It's often best to schedule one-on-one meetings, but you can meet with them all at once if time demands.) Make sure you are on the right page by asking these sorts of questions:

- What ideas do you have for the project?
- What do you expect as the end result of the project?
- What do you expect in terms of communication? Do you want to be aware of every single issue, or do you want status updates at a particular interval?
- What is the best way to get in touch with you?
- What budget do you have for the project?

Setting Expectations

Once you have formed your communication plan, let your sponsor and executives know what to expect from you: weekly voice mails, monthly newsletters, or status reports at a particular interval. Also let your sponsor and executives know that if they do have questions to contact you directly. Make sure you provide your office and cell phone numbers, and an alternate contact that you trust.

Staggering Deliverables

When you are planning, try to stagger your deliverables. This will help keep everyone interested in the project. If the company has invested several million dollars and don't see results for two years, they may pull the plug. But if there have been some successes over those two years, it may be easier for the sponsor and the executives to see the end result.

Staying on Track

During the project, make sure you keep everyone informed via the methods they requested. The key rule is "No surprises." If there is an issue with the project, make sure you bring it to the sponsor's attention via e-mail, a quick phone call, or a face-to-face meeting. (The method you choose will depend on the severity of the issue and the preferences of the person.) Make sure

even small issues are included in a status update. And remember, these high-level performers want to hear about solutions, not problems, so make sure you also mention what you're doing (or what you plan to do) to resolve the issue.

Meeting Tips and Tricks

No matter how hectic things may get during the project, make sure you schedule face-to-face time with your sponsors and your executives on a regular interval. This may just be a quick meeting for coffee, but it's crucial that you get some time in to maintain their interest and commitment.

Make sure, however, that you are prepared for the meeting.

- Set an agenda and stick to it.
- Be concise. Don't waste their time.
- Talk about solutions rather than problems.
- Bring all necessary documents.
- Prepare a list of questions that you think they might ask and responses to those questions.
- If you don't have a particular piece of information, don't waste their time looking for it. Apologize and make a note to send it to them later.

If your executives and sponsor know that a meeting with you will be productive, you will be more likely to get their time and their attention in the future.

Test your Knowledge

Case Study

Last Friday afternoon, Barbara Jones, the CEO of your company, comes rushing in. She has just come out of a budget meeting. Due to a cash flow problem, the budget for this year's annual party has been drastically reduced to \$17,500 from \$75,000. Before, she had hired an outside consultant to do the work, but that's no longer affordable, so she wants you to plan the party for January 1, under the budget allocated.

It's now a week later and you've completed some of your preliminary planning. You've discovered that Barbara will be the project sponsor and the executive responsible for the project.

Role play your meeting with Barbara.

Common Ground

Another element to keeping a conversation civil is to look at what you have in common with the other person, or more specifically, to identify common goals that you share. This could be something as straightforward as making sure the team reaches their goals, or that the work you both do contributes to the project.

Establishing common ground isn't just something to demonstrate at the time of what could be a difficult conversation; it comes from fostering relationships that are based on trust that is consistently present. This is something that needs to be thought about and developed as the project team is forming, and at each meeting and interaction that you have.

Staying in Control

Are you able to maintain your composure when things get heated? If you feel you are being attacked personally when the other person becomes defensive, or you are not at ease in a conflict situation, then try to get some practice first. A trusted colleague, an HR consultant, or a mentor can help you get more comfortable with these situations. If you tend toward anxiety, going through some relaxation techniques beforehand can also help. However, practicing the conversation (even if doesn't go the way you intend) is probably the best way to make it familiar to yourself and less likely to raise your anxiety when you go through it for real.

During the conversation itself, it is essential that you control your own reactions and any anger. Don't apologize for needing to have a particular conversation or the need to complete certain project tasks together, or you may expose a gleam of weakness in your armor. Also, don't think that just because you schedule 45 minutes for a meeting that it will have to take that long. If you can be finished in 30 minutes and this person is someone you find difficult to work with, it's perfectly acceptable (and a better use of your time) to wind up and move on.

When to Walk Away

Create a list of five people-related challenges that you have experienced when working on projects or with teams, as well as how you deal with those things.

Challenge	How I Deal With It

When Things Don't Work

If the relationship goes completely off track, or the problems are not manageable, there are plenty of things that you can still do. After all, you do have a project to manage. If you feel that your leadership skills need development, then we suggest you address that as a long-term objective. In the short term, however, you need your project to be on track and making progress.

Sometimes we can feel a bit beat up, as if we are holding all responsibility for what is going on. If you're a project manager who tries to create a great work environment, most of the staff probably respect and maybe even like you. However, you've likely also had problems with some circumstances, such as people challenging your authority, quitting the team, or going over your head. You might even be tired of dealing with people issues.

However, you need to know that when you don't deal with things, they do not go away on their own. They simply get worse. We can't lead a project successfully if we are always trying to avoid saying what needs to be said, or are afraid of negative consequences. The outcomes of letting things fester are usually much worse. Keep your project plan in mind and draw on resources that you have available to complete your work. This includes asking for help when needed, from your own boss, the project sponsor, mentors, and human resources.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Blanchard, Kenneth. Leading at a Higher Level: Blanchard on Leadership and Creating High Performing Organizations. Pearson Education, 2009.*
- ✓ *Campbell, Clark, and Nick Campbell. The New One-Page Project Manager. Wiley, 2012.*
- ✓ *Hamilton, Cheryl, and Cordell Parker. Communicating for Results (10th Edition). Wadsworth Publishing, 2013.*