

## Document: Communication Plan

Proactive communication is important on all projects. The project manager must make sure that team members, customers, clients and stakeholders have the information they need to do their jobs. Communication is also a vital way to manage expectations about how the project is going and who needs to be doing what. This can be as simple as talking one to one to your team members about how they are doing on their assigned work, or holding a regularly scheduled status meeting. However you do it, proper communication can go a long way toward ensuring project success.

On smaller projects, communication is simple and does not require much proactive effort. However, communication gets much more complex the larger a project gets, and the more people that are involved. Larger projects require communication to be planned in advance, taking into account the particular needs of the people involved. This is where a Communication Plan is useful. A Communication Plan allows you to think through how to communicate most efficiently and effectively to the various constituents. Effective communication means that you are providing information in the right format, at the right time, and with the right impact. Efficient communication means that we are providing the information that is needed, and nothing more.

### Creating a Communication Plan – Summary

Use the following general process when creating a Communication Plan. More detailed information is also available in the following sections.

1. Determine the project stakeholders. In some cases these are groups of stakeholders with similar communications needs, for instance, a project steering committee. In other cases, there may be a single person, for instance the sponsor.
2. Determine the communication needs for each stakeholder, and what you are trying to accomplish. Usually this breaks down into three general areas:
  - **Mandatory** generally includes status reports, legal requirements, financial reporting, etc. This information is pushed out to the recipients.
  - **Informational** material they want to know, or that they may need for their jobs. This information is usually made available for people to read, but requires them to take the initiative, or pull the communication.
  - **Marketing** information is designed to build buy-in and enthusiasm for the project and its deliverables. This type of information is pushed out to the appropriate people. For projects that will require the organization culture or work habits to change, you may also want to “brand” the project.
3. For each stakeholder/objective, brainstorm how to fulfill the communication need. Determine what information they need to know, how often they need an update, and what the best manner is to deliver the information. At this point, be creative in looking for ways to communicate to the project stakeholders. For instance, all stakeholders still need an updated project status. The steering committee may need

to get together for an executive briefing and to provide strategic direction every other month. The project sponsor may need a personal briefing on a monthly basis. A newsletter may need to go out to the entire customer organization on a quarterly basis for informational and marketing purposes.

4. Determine the effort required to create and distribute each of the identified communication options outlined in step 2. Also determine what the potential benefit of the communication is.
5. Prioritize the communication options that were established in the preceding steps. Discard those that require high effort for marginal benefit. Also discard those that provide marginal benefit, even though they may take little effort from the project team. Implement the communication options that provide high value and require low effort from the project team. Also evaluate those options that have high value and require a high level of effort from the project team. Some of these might make sense, others might not.

Regardless of the prioritization, implement any communication options that are mandatory for the project or for the environment. This could include Project Status Reports, government required reports, legal reports, etc.

6. Add the resulting communication activities to the workplan. This will include assigning frequencies, due dates, effort hours, and a responsible person(s) for each communication option implemented.

## **Creating a Communication Plan – Details**

### *Determine Project Stakeholders*

There can be many types of customers, users, vendors, managers, and stakeholders. First determine what people or groups of people you want to include in the Communication Plan.

### *Determine the Communication Needs of Each Stakeholder*

For each of the stakeholders identified above, determine what their communication needs are. For instance, certain managers have a need for ongoing status information. Steering committee members need ongoing status, plus a dialog on strategy and vision. Your users might need awareness communication, mentoring, question-and-answer sheets, promotional information to build enthusiasm, etc. For large projects especially, the project team should be creative in determining how, what, to whom, where, and how frequently the communication takes place.

### *Determine How to Fulfill the Communication Needs of Each Stakeholder*

Project communication can take many shapes and forms. In this step, brainstorm how you will fulfill the communication needs for each stakeholder. When possible, look for types of communication that can cover more than one stakeholder's needs.

**Mandatory:** The types of communication are required by your company, your industry, or by law. This information is pushed to recipients.

- Project Status Reports
- Regular voicemail updates (of status)
- Status meetings
- Meetings with steering committee
- Regular conference calls and videoconferences with remote stakeholders
- Government-required reports and other information
- Financial reporting such as budget vs. actuals, or any other required financial information

**Informational:** This is information people want to know, or that they may need for their jobs. This information is made available for people to read, but requires them to take the initiative, or pull the communication.

- Awareness-building sessions that people are invited to attend (These are not meant as training, just to build awareness.)
- Project paper-based deliverables placed in a common repository, directory, or library that people can access
- Project information on a Web site

**Marketing:** These are designed to build buy-in and enthusiasm for the project and its deliverables. This type of communication is also pushed to the readers.

- Project newsletters, with positive marketing spin
- Meeting one-on-one with key stakeholders on an ongoing basis
- Traveling road shows to various locations and departments to explain project and benefits
- Testimonials from others where value was provided
- Contests with simple prizes to build excitement
- Project acronyms and slogans to portray positive images of the project
- Project countdown till live date
- Informal (but purposeful) walking around to talk up the project to team members, users, and stakeholder
- Celebrations to bring visibility to the completion of major milestones
- Project memorabilia with project name or image portrayed, such as pins, pencils, Frisbees, cups, T-shirts, etc.

- Publicizing accomplishments

#### *Determine the Effort Required*

Determine how much effort is required for each of the communication ideas surfaced previously. Some of the activities might be relatively easy to perform. Others will require more effort. If the communication is ongoing, estimate the effort over a one-month period. For instance, a status report might only take one hour to create, but might be needed twice a month. The total effort would be two hours.

#### *Prioritize the Communication Options*

Some communication activities provide more value than others. In the previous exercise, you brainstormed lists of communication options. Now you need to prioritize the items to determine which provide the most value for the least cost. If a communication activity takes a lot of time and provides little or marginal communication value, it should be discarded. If a communication option takes little effort and provides a lot of value, it should be included in the final Communication Plan. Of course, if a communication activity is mandatory, it should be included no matter what the cost. If a mandatory activity is time consuming, you may be able to negotiate with the stakeholders to find a less-intensive alternative.