

Communicating with Purpose

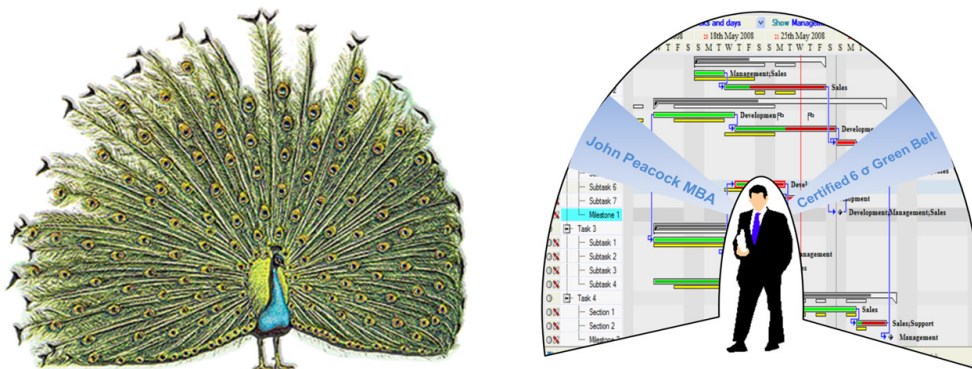
The Effective Use of Push & Pull Communication

Communicating for effect

A There is absolutely no point in communicating with someone if you do not want an effect!

The effect you are seeking can vary dramatically; you may want the person to do something, stop doing something, feel happier or more supportive, or even feel worried or concerned. The starting point in any effective communication is developing a clear picture of what it is you want the communication to achieve.

A significant proportion of formal project communications are simply intended to keep people informed and supportive. Achieving this effect is helped if the reports, newsletters, and other project communications that are elegant, stylish and easy to read. A well-presented report generates positive emotional reactions in its readers, particularly if it includes a few appropriate charts and graphs. The feeling generated by the report is that its creators are 'in control'. Conversely a scruffy report suggests lack of control or lack of concern for the reader.



The rest of your communications are likely to be focused on persuading the receiver to change their behaviours; start something, do things differently, quicker, slower better or even stop! The communication medium can be anything from a casual conversation through to a formal contract notice. However, regardless of the medium, if the communication is to be effective in achieving the desired change, several key elements need to be incorporated.

- The most important element is an unambiguous statement of precisely what it is you want the receiver to do or change. This information needs to be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Framed.
- The second element is to demonstrate the reason why this is important to you. Telling your life partner to lose weight is unlikely to get a positive response; suggesting they lose a couple of kilos in the next month because you are concerned about changes in their health is likely to get a more positive reaction.
- The last element is defining the benefit the receiver can expect if they cooperate with your request. Mutuality recognises you are far more likely to get what you want from a communication if the receiver can expect something of value as well.

WIIFM – What's In It For Me – trumps altruism 8 times out of 10!



Mutuality does not mean changing contract conditions or offering unethical inducements; rather it is a process of connecting your needs and requirements to an objective or benefit that is of value to the receiver¹. Within the team this may be directly aligned with motivational initiatives such as recognition, autonomy or advancement. When advising upwards to senior managers, linking the requested action to the expected project outcomes and organisational value may be a more appropriate way of motivating your manager to help you make them successful.

Communication for effect is a subtle art; you need clarity in your objectives from the communication, if you don't know what you want you are unlikely to get it! You also need to understand the receiver's value proposition, what's in it for them. Then you need to work out how to connect these two elements in a culturally sensitive way that is most likely to achieve the outcome you need.

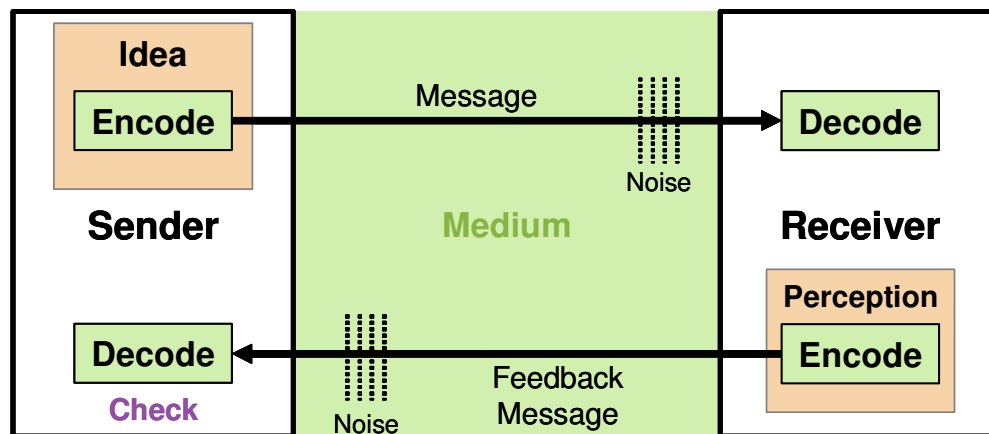
If you think this is too hard, remember there is absolutely no point in communicating with someone if you don't want an effect.

Reporting -v- Communicating

When it comes to effective communication, reporting and communicating are not the same!

Sending out information has very little to do with effective communication. Many project communication plans are simply a schedule for the distribution of project reports, and whilst this is a potentially useful activity, it contributes very little to the overall success of the project².

Communicating effectively with key stakeholders is the critical element in achieving a successful project outcome. It starts with understanding who the important stakeholders are 'at this point in time'³. Then determining the reason you need to communicate with the person, and designing a communication strategy to achieve your desired outcome. Finally, as the communication strategy is implemented, you need processes in place to measure the effectiveness of the communication and make sure it is working effectively; there is absolutely no point in persisting with an approach that is not working!



¹ For more on *mutuality* see:

<https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/the-stakeholder-mutuality-matrix/>

² For more on the *three types of stakeholder communication* see:

https://mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1020_Three_types_stakeholder_communication.pdf

³ For more on *identifying and prioritising stakeholders* see:

<https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-075.php#Process3>

Reports fulfil a different purpose. Well-designed reports contain useful information in a time series, this makes them a valuable data repository and the process of gathering and reviewing the information can generate valuable insights for the project team to act upon. However, the data in the reports is passive, you cannot assume anyone will read, understand or using the information!

Effective communication requires you to send a message that is received, interpreted, and a response returned to you by the receiver so you can check the receiver has understood the message correctly. It is a two-way process, for a communication to be complete the sender needs to know the message has been received and understood. Ideally, the communication will then be acted upon by the receiver to the benefit of the project.

As a project artefact, reports have intrinsic value. Simply generating well designed reports will create positive emotional responses in the minds of many managers. Additionally, some people simply like getting reports and some roles associated with organisational governance are based on receiving and processing the data contained in your reports.

Reports also contribute value because the project manager feels comfortable because she or he has a 'proper report' that is part of the 'clothing' every project manager wears along with their Bar Charts and other report suggests control, order and capability⁴. Conversely, a project manager without reports is simply not behaving 'properly' and will be penalised for their non-conformance; to quote Mark Twain, "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society!" We need to conform, but generating reports is not communication!

To transform a report into a communication you need to either deliver them in person, or attach a note, to highlight specific issues or messages you want the receiver to action and seek a specific response to know the message has been understood. Without the feedback loop, all you have done is forward a message, you have no idea if the message has arrived, been seen or been understood, and without understanding there certainly won't be any action.

Communicating effectively is hard work. You need to focus your efforts on the people that matter and then communicate in a way that is likely to achieve your desired outcome. This requires effective stakeholder analysis so you spend most of your communication 'budget' on the people who are really important 'at this point in time'⁵.

For everyone else, forwarding your reports (or preferably making your reports available through an effective 'pull system') is an effective way to stay in touch and keeps the channels open for when you do need to communicate in the future. You cannot communicate if the communication channels are not open.

Communicating for effect is a focused discipline, you only have a limited amount of time and resources that can be used for communication and this 'budget' needs to be spent where it will achieve the maximum return. For everyone else, if you don't need anything in particular from the person there is no point in communicating, just send a report.

Push -v- Pull Communication

Everyone in business today is buried under an avalanche of data, adding routine reports to the data mountain may no longer be useful! Is it time to bury traditional reports?

⁴ Jon Whitty, University of Southern Queensland, Australia: *The emotional effect of project artefacts*.

⁵ For more on *stakeholder analytics* see: <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-TPI-075.php#Process3>



Project reports originated in the days of typewriters and carbon paper. Information was painstakingly compiled, copy-typed and distributed to inform managers of the situation several days ago. Whilst today, the process usually involves word processors, PDF files and email, the information structure of a report fundamentally has not changed. Maybe it time for a new approach. Most of us expect instant access to our bank account details why should project information be any different?

Intranets and 'cloud' computing make real-time information on-demand a reality. All that is needed is the willingness to drag 19th century communication into the 21st century and easier to access, better information can be at everyone's fingertips when needed.

By linking the various project information sources to an effective shared data environment with a simple-to-use dashboard for executives, you can remove out of date reports from the data overload. Instead of pushing out, out-of-date information, everyone can 'pull' the information they need 'now' and with a well-designed system drill down to the level of detail appropriate to their requirements.

Changing to a 'pull' environment will subtly change many roles for the better.

- The project manager will need to keep the project information up to date as it changes. Issues should be opened, escalated and closed as their status changes. The weekly schedule updates need to be processed, checked and uploaded to the project portal quickly. Monthly cost data imported and reconciled as it is released by finance, etc. Good project portals maintain an audit trail of updates and changes so everyone can see what information has changed when.
- Project team members and contractors will need training to access to update their information and read other relevant data. By accessing current data in real time, the possibility of people working on out-of-date design data and other communication failures are eliminated.
- Traditional systems use manual interventions to extract information from project work; but there is no reason why well-designed systems cannot be far more directly integrated so that doing work updates project control systems. It is not done well yet but collaboration tools and systems such as BIM (Building Information Modelling⁶) in construction and engineering have a lot of potential to directly link doing the work to updating the project management information systems.
- The role of the PMO shifts to real time validation and oversight plus providing training and support, particularly setting up filters and reports so that key executives get access to the specific information they need to do their jobs. A key feature of a well-designed project information system is the ability to set automatic alerts for individuals at all levels if a defined event or condition occurs; eg, alerting team members if a design change has been made to documents they are using.

By moving project information to a 'pull' environment where all of the relevant stakeholders can access the most up to date information they need, when they want it, requires a well-designed system, support and training but has enormous advantages including:

- Less unwanted data in managers 'in-boxes'.
- Greater visibility and accountability (although some project managers may not like this).
- Reduction in errors and rework caused by using out-of-date information.
- Better coordination.
- The ability to identify and resolve problems sooner, particularly in virtual teams.

The primary advantage for project managers is in the time saved by not having to compile monthly reports focused on out of date information. Their day to day work of managing the project is the report.

⁶ For more on **BIM** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1082_BIM_Levels.pdf



Also, by shifting the bulk of the project information into an on-demand 'pull' environment, the organisations communication bandwidth is opened up for effective 'push' communication. Important messages can now be sent to stakeholders when necessary either stand alone or linking to key information in the project portal. The clearer communication channel means the message is more likely to be noticed and acted upon.

However sensible this change, expect opposition, some people simply like getting reports, dropping those people off your distribution list may make them more upset than you realise. This also applies to cutting content. As a rule of thumb, by the third month it's probably too late to remove sections or drop recipients without encountering some issues. And, the key challenge with a 'pull' approach is knowing if the right people have accessed and understood the right information.

The Changed Use of Reports

Moving to a 'pull' environment does not necessarily mean reports are dead – but if they survive, their use and value will change. Progress data will be published as soon as it is available (preferably using automated real-time reporting), and smaller, specific end-date period reporting will use this information to analyse variance, trends and/or compare projects using benchmarking and performance standards. Some of the key residual functions of reports include:

- Well-designed historical reports contain large amounts of useful information in a time series, making them a valuable data repository. And if the report covers the right questions, the process of gathering the information can generate valuable insights for the project team to act upon, the time-series also allows stakeholders to extract trends and status from the stored information.
- Another benefit of reports is only starting to be recognized. Jon Whitty of the University of Southern Queensland here in Australia has been measuring the emotional effect of project artefacts. Based on Jon's work it seems a well-formatted report will in itself increase positive emotions. The project manager feels comfortable because she or he has a "proper report" that is part of the "clothing" every project manager wears along with their Gantt charts and other expected artefacts. And senior managers experience positive emotions because the existence of a well-presented report suggests control, order and capability.
- If you deliver the reports in person or attach a note to highlight specific issues or messages, reports can form the basis of a targeted, purposeful communication.
- The need for prediction based on reflective analysis and communicating the developed ideas also remains. This is likely to be a much smaller report each month that contains the explanation and proposed recovery actions associated with identified variances, forecasts, assessments and other insights derived from the project data.

The challenge will be to design reports that are relatively easy to produce, ask the right questions, are well-structured, well-formatted, and contain needed information; developing these reports is an art form, and it's one that every PMO manager needs to master

The technologies exist to make these ideas a reality; the challenge is breaking the management reporting habits of a century. The UK government is moving to make these ideas a reality in the construction industry – it is now UK law that all new major government projects will use BIM within a few months, and new forms of contract are being developed to support this requirement. I suspect the trend will spread across industries and across nations.



However, moving to an effective project information portal does leave one question unanswered, with effective real-time communication, what is everyone going to do in those boring monthly meetings?? Perhaps we could save even more time for useful work!!



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