

Introduction

Proactive communication is important on all projects. The project manager must make sure that team members, customers, 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 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 becomes much more complex as projects increase in size and scope and involve more people. Larger projects require project managers to plan communication in advance, taking into account the particular needs of the people involved. This is where a Communication Plan proves useful. A Communication Plan allows you to think through how you might 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 you are providing the information that is needed and nothing more.

Creating a communications plan: Summary

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

1. Identify the project stakeholders. You may find that your stakeholders are essentially groups of people, like a project steering committee, that have similar communication needs. In other cases, a stakeholder may be an individual, like the project sponsor.
2. Determine the communication needs for each stakeholder and decide what you are trying to accomplish. Usually, the type of needed communication can be categorized by one or more of three general descriptors:
 - **Mandatory:** This generally includes project status reports, legal requirements, financial reporting, etc. This information is pushed out to the recipients.
 - **Informational:** This is information that stakeholders will want to know or may require to do their jobs. It's usually made available for people to read but they must take the initiative or pull the communication for themselves.
 - **Marketing:** This is information designed to build buy-in and enthusiasm for the project and its deliverables. It's pushed out to the appropriate people. For projects that will require the organization's culture or work habits to change, you may also want to "brand" the project to encourage buy-in.
3. For each stakeholder/objective, you should brainstorm on how best to fulfill the communication need. Determine what information each stakeholder or group needs to know, how often they need an update, and the best manner in which 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, but the steering committee may also 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 quarterly newsletter may need to go out to the entire customer organization 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 the potential benefit of the communication.
5. Prioritize the communication options that you have established. 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. Evaluate those options that have high value and require a high level of effort from the project team. Some of these might make sense, but others may not.
6. 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.
7. 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

Project can involve 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 you identify, determine their communication needs. For instance, certain managers will need ongoing status information. Steering committee members need ongoing status reports, plus a dialog on strategy and vision. Your users might need awareness communication, mentoring, question-and-answer sheets, promotional information to build enthusiasm, etc. Especially on large projects, 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: These types of communication are required by your company, your industry, or by law. This information is pushed to recipients. The following are some examples of this type of communication:

- Project status reports
- Regular status updates via voicemail
- 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 that people want to know or that they may need to know to do their jobs. This information is made available for people to read but requires them to take the initiative or pull the communication for themselves. Following are some examples:

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

Marketing: These forms of communication are designed to build buy-in and enthusiasm for the project and its deliverables. This information is also pushed to the recipients. Here are some examples:

- 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 the project and its benefits
- Testimonials from others about the value that was provided
- Contests with simple prizes to build excitement
- Project acronyms and slogans to portray positive images of the project
- Project countdown until live date
- Informal (but purposeful) walking around to "talk up" the project to team members, users, and stakeholders
- Celebrations to bring visibility to the completion of major milestones
- Project memorabilia with project name or image portrayed, such as pencils, Frisbees, cups, T-shirts, pins, etc.
- Publicizing accomplishments

Determine the effort required

Determine how much effort is required for each of the communication ideas the project team has come up with. If the communication is ongoing, estimate the effort over a one-month period. For instance, a status report might take only one hour to create, but it might be needed twice a month. Then, of course, the total effort would be two hours.

Prioritize the communication options

Some communication activities provide more value than others. In a 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.

Sample Communication Plan

Deliverable/Description	Type	Target Audience(s)	Delivery Method	Delivery Frequency	Who Responsible?
Status Reports	Mandatory	Sponsor Managers Steering Committee	Paper Status Report Template e-mailed to audience	Monthly	Project Manager
Local Awareness-Building Sessions Inform people of the project and the deliverables that will affect them.	Informational	Local user community	Stand-up presentations	Schedule twice weekly until all users covered.	Lead Analyst
Remote Awareness-Building Sessions Inform people of the project and the deliverables that will affect them.	Informational	Remote user community	Webcast presentations	Hold sessions three times a week until all users covered.	Lead Analyst
Project Pins Pins will be given out to all people attending the awareness presentations to build enthusiasm and brand image.	Marketing	All users, customers, and stakeholders	Hand out to those that attend the awareness presentations. Send pin in intercompany mail to those that attend Webcasts.	Same frequency as awareness sessions	Project Administrator

Additional resources

- TechRepublic's [Downloads RSS Feed](#) **XML**
- Sign up for our [Downloads Weekly Update](#) newsletter
- Sign up for our [Project Management Newsletter](#)
- Check out all of TechRepublic's [free newsletters](#)
- "[Apply your project management toolkit for a more smoothly running project](#)" (TechRepublic article)
- "[Avoid these common causes for project failure](#)" (TechRepublic article)
- "[Build a foundation for project success with this definition template](#)" (TechRepublic download)
- "[Keep stakeholders in the loop with this project status report template](#)" (TechRepublic download)

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