

Communications Plans for Small Projects

Dr. Bill Carswell

Embry Riddle Aeronautical University

### Abstract

The body of knowledge advising project managers on communications techniques and communications theory is significant. Textbooks have been written on the subject and the PMBOK has an entire section devoted to project communications management. The PMBOK recommends the development of a communications plan to determine the project stakeholder information needs and define a communications approach. This ensures that the right information is provided in the right format at the right time with the right impact. Based on the stakeholder register and the stakeholder management strategy, the project plan should include stakeholder communications requirements, define the information to be communicated and at what level of detail, justify the reason for distributing information, outline the time frame and frequency for information distribution, the person responsible and who will receive the information. This information can be tailored for small projects to simply identify who needs what information and what needs to be communicated. The communications plan should identify regular communications, such as weekly/monthly reporting and as-needed information, such as change management decisions and one-time items, like test reports. Finally, all communications items must be captured in the schedule to ensure they take place.

### **Introduction**

Entire volumes on communications techniques and theory have been written to advise project managers on best practices for project communications. (Dow & Taylor, 2008) The Project Management Institute (PMI) has devoted an entire chapter of its Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) (PMI, 2008, Ch. 10) to project communications management. All these recommendations and processes can be a bit overwhelming for a project manager and out of proportion to implement on a small project. There are usually only a few people who need to be involved in detailed and regular project communications when the project is small, and often the communications are informal and done verbally and through spontaneous emails. In one sense this lessens the need for a project communications plan, but in another sense it makes the need for a good communications plan all the more important. If formal communications are not enforced on small projects key decisions can be left undocumented, key stakeholders can get left out of the loop, and project discipline can break down. This paper outlines the PMBOK processes for planning project communications, then recommends an approach for small businesses that is simple, efficient, and not very time consuming, but effective in contributing to project discipline and success.

### **The PMBOK Approach**

The PMBOK identifies “Plan Communications” as the project communications management process for the “Planning Process Group” in the its Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMI, 2008, p. 43). The primary output of this PMBOK process is the communications management plan, which becomes part of the overall project plan. According to the PMBOK the purpose of the Plan Communications process is to

determine the project stakeholder information needs and define a communications approach. The ultimate goal of the project plan is to ensure that information is provided in the right format, at the right time and with the right impact.

The two primary inputs to the communications planning process are the stakeholder register and the stakeholder management strategy, developed as part of the initiating process group.

The output, the communications plan, is described in the PMBOK as having the following characteristics:

- Stakeholder communication requirements
- Information to be communicated, including language, format, content and level of detail
- Reason for the distribution of that information
- Time frame and frequency for the distribution of required information
- Person responsible for communicating the information
- Person responsible for authorizing release of confidential information
- Person or groups who will receive the information
- Methods or technologies used to convey the information, such as memos, email and/or press releases
- Resources allocated for communication activities, including time and budget
- Escalating process identifying time frames and the management chain (names) for escalation of issues that cannot be resolved at a lower staff level

- Method for updating and refining the communications management plan as the project progresses and develops
- Glossary of common terminology
- Flow charts of the information flow in the project, workflows with possible sequence of authorization, list of reports and meeting plans, etc...
- Communication constraints, usually derived from specific legislation or regulation, technology and organization policies, etc...

### **An Approach for Small Projects**

The ultimate objective for a communications project plan for a small project is to make sure the right people get the right information at the right time. There is usually no need to discuss communications technologies, develop information flow charts and authorization sequences, define escalation processes, or allocate schedule and budget resources for communications. Nor is there usually a need to communicate with the general public. On small projects, it is usually sufficient to think through who needs to be in on the communications loops, and what those loops need to be on a regular basis.

In the initiating process we developed a stakeholder register, a template of which is shown in the appendix of this paper. The stakeholder register identifies the key stakeholders and all their primary communications requirements. Developing a communications plan then becomes a matter of identifying which communications need to take place with what frequency

With this information in hand, the key to developing a communications plan is to organize this information into actionable activities by communications item. Effectively, this is a matter of reformatting the stakeholder register so that it is organized by report type rather than by stakeholder. The following are examples for a small project plan.

**Regular Communications**

- Daily planning meetings: These are stand-up meetings and should last no more than 15 minutes. The implementing team members should be advised of any significant updates to the plans, clearly understand their individual goals for the day, and have the opportunity to identify any problems they are having and ask for any help they may need.
- Weekly customer status report: This is a teleconference involving the customer PM, technical lead and contract administrator. The performing organization will be represented by the PM and the DPM. The agenda will be schedule and risk updates.
- Monthly customer reports: This is a face-to-face meeting at the customer location. Attendees will be the performing organization PM and DPM and the customer PM, DPM and contract manager. Earned value management will be reported based on WBS progress.
- Quarterly reports (financials): This quarterly written report will be submitted from the performing organization contract manager to the customer contract administrator. It will contain reporting information according to contract CDRL-006.

**As-Needed Communications**

- No information will be provided to the customer except through the performing organization PM
- Change management reports will be submitted by the performing organization PM to the performing organization contract manager, then to the customer contract administrator after they have passed through the formal change control process
- All formal reports and data deliverables called for in the contract will be provided by the performing organization PM to the performing organization contract manager, then to the customer contract administrator after they have passed through the performing organization's review and approval processes.

The importance of this plan, for a small project, is that this exercise forces the PM to think through WHAT needs to be communicated, WHEN it needs to be communicated and WHO needs to be involved.

Once this information has been identified, it must be captured in the schedule as actionable items. This is the final, crucial step. With the exception of something like a daily stand-up, every communications action, especially those called for in the contract, must be captured in the schedule.

References

Dow, W. & Taylor, B. (2008). *Project management communications bible*. Indianapolis

IN. Wiley Publishing Inc.

Project Management Institute. (2008). *Project management body of knowledge* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.).

Newton Square, PA. PMI Publications.



## Appendix

**Project Name Here**  
**Stakeholder Register**  
 Project Manager: Name Here  
 Date: Date Here

Power/Interest Categorization Table

Level of Power	Level of Interest	Management Strategy
High	High	Manage Closely
High	Low	Keep Satisfied
Low	High	Keep Informed
Low	Low	Monitor

ID	Stakeholder Name/Position Title/Organization
1	
2	
3	

ID	Power/Interest Management Strategy
1	
2	
3	

ID	Primary role (Sponsor/User/Deliverable etc...) and influences
1	
2	
3	

ID	What information do they need and when/how often
1	
2	
3	

ID	Special Success Criteria Considerations
1	
2	
3	

ID	Special risk considerations and/or mitigation resources/interests
1	
2	
3	