

Resources for project teams: Communication strategies

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Introduction

Effective and efficient communication strategies have been identified as a critical success factor in project management. In the context of a collaborative project with multiple partners of differing backgrounds, skills and operating environments, the model of collaboration and the communication strategies adopted are important for delivering the best outcomes for the project team and stakeholders. Often these core elements are given cursory attention in the project design stage, however, if left unexamined, they can raise serious problems down the line as differing expectations and understandings of the project by team members, partners, or other stakeholders come to light.

This paper highlights some of the issues to consider when developing a communications strategy. There is no ideal model: the approaches adopted will depend on the project's objectives, the project team and partners, and the resources available to them. Reflections have been drawn from the reported experiences of project holders including key success factors, shared learnings, and difficulties encountered in the course of implementing ALTC projects.

Key Elements

A well executed project relies on effective communication. The function of good communication is to:

- ensure the availability of accurate information for those involved in the project;
- facilitate the planning, coordination and implementation of action plans;
- influence the attitudes and behaviour of stakeholder groups; and
- encourage and facilitate feedback and response mechanisms (JISC 2009, p.44).

The danger for the project team is that poorly understood decisions can lead to confusion and extended delays. Decisions made by individuals without reference to others in the project team can be a source of real tension. Well intentioned stakeholders may derail the project if they are not aware of the rationale behind changes in the project plan.

Whilst not all projects will develop a formal communications strategy the following aspects should be explored early in the project:

- the roles and expectations of all stakeholders, and their communication requirements;
- systems for regular communications with stakeholders;
- documentation of decisions and discussion; and
- agreed processes for the resolution of disagreement or conflict within the project team.

Key stakeholders in the project are likely to include:

- the project team;
- project partners and those directly involved in the project's implementation;
- members of the project reference group, university senior management, and professional bodies who have an involvement in the project; and
- external stakeholders including the ALTC, students, broader academic community.

Roles, expectations and information requirements

Time spent in the project establishment phase clarifying roles and expectations of team members, and other stakeholders, is invaluable. All participants in the project need to know exactly what their role entails and how it fits within the team and project plan. In particular, the roles of the Project Leader and the Project Manager are critical to the successful development and implementation of the project, including the project leader's capacity to effectively negotiate with stakeholders, organise and keep track of project processes and actively engage in the research. One team described the benefits of good leadership in the following way: "Having a well respected, hard working and committed leader who was also able to negotiate with sticky situations and work with stakeholders is essential" (Barns 2008, p.13).

Face to face meetings have continuously been reported as essential to building bonds between the team and exploring the strengths, weakness and constraints of individual members. Teasing out and fully understanding the proposal, institutional cultural variations, different uses of terminology, and the nuances of interpretation, face to face, ensures many basic problems are dealt with at the start. Joint benchmarks should also be determined collaboratively at commencement. Investing initially in relationship building has also reportedly increased stakeholder buy in and made resolution of subsequent issues arising easier.

Communication strategies

Maintaining communication within and beyond the project team is critical. Systems can minimise the fragmentation of the project team over the course of the project, and ensure that the project remains on track.

A stakeholder analysis is a useful tool to explore:

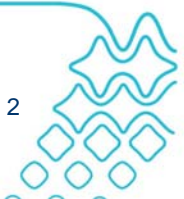
- who the stakeholders are; and
- what information is required and when.

A communications plan can then be developed providing more detailed information:

- what is the best method to provide and receive that information?
- who is responsible for providing that information? and
- what are the associated costs?

The communication strategies chosen will depend on the size and structure of the project. In smaller teams regular meetings, emails and informal contact may be sufficient. For larger teams the ability to rely on verbal contact is reduced and so the need for well documented communication increases. With a highly distributed project team or stakeholder group, the risk of misunderstandings, and people being left out of the loop, increases, and so a greater use of more formal communications methods is essential.

As more and more project teams look to technological and social networking solutions, the use of wikis, websites, sharepoints, including the ALTC Exchange, has increased. Whilst these prove effective for some teams, others have struggled with technical difficulties, cross institutional access and compatibility problems, and users unfamiliar with, or resistant to using, newer technologies.



In one project with diversity across three partner universities in both skill sets and geographical locations, regular communication has been by way of email, phone and documentation. Additionally team member experiences are recorded on Drupal, where each team member has the opportunity to provide comment (Cybulski 2008, p. 3).

Stakeholder analysis

It is worthwhile to identify each of the key stakeholders, their information needs and develop a communications strategy accordingly: the information required, means of communication, frequency and by whom. Consider:

- Who is the target audience?
- What is the key message to be conveyed?
- Which communications channel would be most suitable?
- Who will be responsible? When?
- How will feedback be dealt with?
- What are the costs involved?
- How can we review/assess the effectiveness of the communication?
- What are the costs or risks to the project of not meeting key stakeholders information needs?

Frequency and type

The frequency and type of communication varies across the life of the project. The early phases and key milestones may require more intense consultation and collaboration, whilst in later stages the frequency of meetings is reduced and the activity at sub-group level increases. These changing demands need to be factored into the workplans of key team members. A number of project holders found that consistent communication and collaboration across (and sometimes within) institutions, whilst essential, is often difficult, especially during the end of semester, when workloads increase significantly.

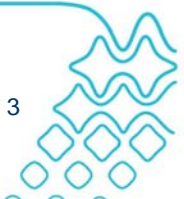
Project coordination

A number of project teams identify a documented communications strategy as a key success factor:

The Communication and Dissemination Plan (was) developed by the Team to identify and record the Project's engagement with information sharing over the course of the two years. The plan contained a detailed strategy of the various audiences (e.g. students, Advisory Committee members, ALTC, ECU T&L faculty), their role/ engagement in the Project, the medium being used to communicate information (e.g. newsletters, website, presentation) and the completion dates. The Plan provided a clear guide to a crucial activity that can easily become marginalised in the 'busy' life of a Project. Throughout the Project the Team referred to the Plan and successfully met the target's it had set (Barns et al. 2008 p.14).

Through the Project Initiation Document (which initially identified team member responsibilities and deliverables), the monthly Project Status Reports (which tracks status of individual tasks and actuals against budget) and emails to individuals indicating/reminding team members of their task responsibilities and timelines, the project at present is in good shape from both a timeline and budget perspective (Cybulski 2008, p. 3).

Several lessons have been learnt thus far. Including.. ' the value of effective communication channels among the leadership team, project partners, the evaluation team, reference group, and the educators network. The newsletter and the website have proven valuable resources in keeping people informed of project developments. Internal IT



networks have been created for secure and confidential sharing and back-up of research related files between the project leadership team. This has increased the ability to disseminate information among project team members with project files readily available to all. The network drive is regularly updated by the project manager (Allen 2008, p. 5).

The difficulties

It requires a common commitment to maintaining and achieving the plan. Many project teams have overcommitted staff and face serious time constraints. One team noted that, whilst the technical side of the project continued, the various reporting functions slipped (Adams et al 2008, p. 25).

Ensuring planned meeting happen

The tyranny of distance is a problem even within Sydney, and maintaining a regular series of project meetings was the main challenge this year. Meeting online or by phone has not proved as successful – we may have to refine this in the future. Meeting by phone with overseas team members was relatively more successful – perhaps because it has to happen out of office hours (Taylor 2008 p. 3).

Relationships are important

Time and again project holders emphasised the value of face to face meetings.

When issues of conflict arose we utilised and built on the spirit of cooperation, goodwill and individuals' drive to achieve goals. Face-to-face meetings allow more time to interact and are important in maintaining team spirit and reinforcing common goals. We have decided that periodic face-to-face meetings are essential but very difficult to organise so we have settled on a model whereby we have regular teleconferences interspersed with central meetings (Merrit 2008a, p. 3).

Other stakeholders

Stakeholders outside the immediate project team include the host institution, reference group, the ALTC, related professional associations and broader academic community. As identified in the stakeholder analysis, the needs of each stakeholder differ. However grouping stakeholders with similar information needs can streamline communication flows.

Broad consultation from the beginning of the project, and securing commitment from busy administrators and teaching staff to provide access to students and data, or in promoting the project, is critical. However, achieving the uptake and official recognition for a newly established project can be difficult. One project met this challenge by creating a 'national consultative group' and maintaining regular e-communication. In this regard, a National Consultative Workshop was held in order to provide interested parties with the opportunity to contribute ideas and resources.

Another project holder reported that:

Early formation of a more ... realistic understanding of the contemporary research environment is also of great benefit. Participating lecturers, external to the Project team, face many demands on their time. Effective cooperation requires sufficient lead-in time and ongoing engagement. Potential student participants in the study also face many demands on their time; as well, they are often the target of several research projects simultaneously. These factors all need to be built into data collection design and viability projections.

Building and maintaining harmonious relations within the lead institutions should also be factored in.

Such a relationship cannot be taken for granted in institutions with budget models that see host schools the worse rather than the better off from having won competitive research grant money. The working relationship with our host school has ensured smooth management of fund allocation, booking venues for seminars and assistance with reporting procedures (Peterson 2008, p. 5).



Understanding the information requirements of ALTC and the provision of timely reports is important. Any key issues, changes or problems arising in the project should be advised or discussed with ALTC staff as soon as they arise, including changes in project leadership or partners. In this way it is easier to clarify and resolve a way forward before problems escalate.

Documentation of decisions and discussion

Documenting the project decisions and discussions during the life of the project is crucial to ensuring everyone understands how and why a decision was made, and the rationale for changes in the project plan or processes.

Changes in personnel and roles at the universities will occur during the life of the project. A well-documented history is key to ensuring that new members can take up their responsibilities quickly, understanding the parameters of work.

Written records are also an important source for evaluations or audits during or after the project. Some documentation may be required for legal reasons, audits, data privacy protection, etc. These needs should be ascertained from the institutions involved at the outset.

Resolving conflict

The identification, prioritising, and resolution of issues which arise is a constant aspect of managing projects. A clearly understood system for logging issues and recording the outcome, such as a common log point or regular management meetings, provides clarity about how, when, and where issues will be addressed. The project leader and project manager were both seen to have a crucial role in dealing with problems as they arise. Determining when decisions are to be made collaboratively versus by individual team members is not easy.

A common purpose and strong personal commitment amongst the project team tends to over-ride impediments. Project team discussions can reveal obstacles associated with each of the individual institutions. We were able to rally each other by affirming that if we prepare a product that is undeniably useful then the bureaucratic impediments can be dealt with afterward (Merritt 2008b p. 3).

Learnings

The leadership and teams of completed projects reflect on key learnings in their final reporting to ALTC. A number of their reflections are included here.

DBI: Mapping the future of Occupational Therapy Education in the 21st Century

This project was designed to provide the basis for future directions, including practice and scholarship for occupational therapy (OT), including developing curriculum of undergraduate and graduate entry OT curricula nationally.

Finding time for the entire project team to meet at the outset was considered critical. If the team is unable to meet face to face, be flexible and prepared to utilise other options (e.g. teleconference, email). Planning more regular team discussions at the beginning of the project was valuable in establishing focus, direction and expectations for the remainder of the project. By reviewing the project plan regularly, and establishing and adhering to clear time frames, the project progressed according to schedule. The team would also regularly schedule a team meeting directly before meeting with the Steering Committee and Reference Group, in order to clarify thoughts, plans, and expected outcomes from those meetings with stakeholders. Although the project team had access to sophisticated



communication technology (Elluminate), we preferred to utilise more pedestrian methods (i.e. phone, email) since it required no further training and the more basic media was sufficient for the team's requirements. Employing a capable and dedicated project manager, who possessed both project management and discipline specific content skills, was considered important to the success of the project. However, it is also very important that all members of the team are able to prioritise time to work on the project. Team work was critical to the project's success and further enabled by identifying appropriate mechanisms for communicating across the team.

On Stakeholders and Communication

Selective recruitment to the Steering Committee and Reference Group was important to ensure that enlisted stakeholders were supportive of both the project and the project team. The team utilised regular and multiple methods of communicating with stakeholders (e.g. project newsletter, regular teleconferences, email broadcasts). These open and regular channels of communication assisted with establishing goodwill with the stakeholders, which of course is extremely critical to the success and acceptance of the project within the professional community (Rodger et al 2008, p. 34-35).

Diversity: A longitudinal study of how student diversity relates to resilience and successful progression in a new generation university, Edith Cowan University

A study of student resilience in a new generation university as students progress through the later years of their degree, juggling competing demands of time and allegiances. The project developed strategies to inform institutional practices and support student resilience over time.

The evaluator's report on team development highlighted:

The Team's capacity to work collectively throughout the project has been exemplary and from the initial stages of the project the Team has worked as a cohesive and professional research unit. Team members brought different perspectives, perceptions and insights to the project, a practice which is highlighted in the collective analysis undertaken with the focus group and interview data. This acknowledgement of difference was also identified in a discussion of what Team members brought to the project. Alongside of the importance attached to the skills of the Chief Investigator (CI) and Coordinator other members were recognised for their skills, from expertise in particular research methods to the capacity to offer alternate ways of 'knowing and doing'. Whilst there were 'moments' where some member's participation was less than anticipated, the coordination and leadership of the CI and Coordinator with support from other Team members allowed the project to continue without significant disruption. In identifying what qualities or behaviours facilitated their successful working relationships, the Team identified the following qualities:

- Recognition and acceptance of team members
- Understanding where Team members 'are at' and what they are able to do
- Being flexible and allowing for flexibility in contribution
- Importance of communicating with Team members — especially in relation to this 'where you're at' information. (Barns 2008 p.12).

On Project Documentation

The Project's processes and activities were documented with accuracy and precision providing a comprehensive and detailed account of the Project's life. Team meeting minutes, memos, emails, phone calls, and newsletters were each documented within a Project file which became like the 'encyclopaedia' of the Project. This hard copy file provided a central and primary resource documenting the Project's activities, processes and outputs.

As described by the Project Manager: "I made a Year 1 and Year 2 lever arch file to store hard copies of minutes, planning documents, dissemination, reports, information on the website, data analysis results, documentation and emails of the different phases of the



project. Attention to detail was also carried over to the content of these documents. For example the format and structure of the Team meeting minutes provide an excellent illustration of the way in which issues of consistency and accountability were actioned throughout the Project. Each set of Minutes provided a brief yet detailed account of the issues discussed, actions to be undertaken by members prior to the next fortnightly meeting, and identified Project staff presentation commitments or annual leave.”

The successful retention of students within the Project was also in part, due to the efforts of the Team, and in particular the Coordinator. From one period of data collection to the next, email and/or phone contact was made with students as a means of keeping the Project ‘alive’ and ensuring that students were informed of the Project’s findings and outcomes as it progressed.

Team Meetings

Integral to the success of the Project and the competency with which each stage and activity have been undertaken are the team meetings. To-date the Project Team has undertaken team Meetings on average of one every two weeks which is an excellent record of the Team’s commitment to the Project. These meetings have been used as a forum for identifying and discussing issues relating to the project. In my discussions with the Team a number of members described ‘Team Meetings’ as a space for getting organised, prioritising tasks and actions” and a way in which to keep the project going. From reading the minutes kept from each of the meetings and in discussions with the Team members the regularity and ‘formality’ of the Team Meetings also seemed to encourage a sense of accountability between and to other Project members. The momentum was important for keeping the Project timetable and plan, a particularly valuable practice within a context of other teaching and administrative activities. Team meetings were also spaces in which members facilitated and supported each other’s personal learning and professional development.

Advisory Committee

From discussions with the Project Team it is apparent that two members of the Committee were engaged and provided important input into the Project. In regards to the remaining participants a number of potential barriers were identified, relating to the difficulties confronting academics and administrative staff in the university domain. The issue was also linked to the difficulties experienced by the Team in generating interest with people in senior levels of the university. In discussions with the Team about the committee, members identified the need to adopt different strategies for involving both ‘influential’ people, for example people who have a vested interest in the project and people who are engaged in both the grassroots and management levels (Barns 2008 p.14-15).

Disseminating strategies for incorporating Australian Indigenous content into undergraduate psychology programs throughout Australia

This project aimed to develop and disseminate curriculum guidelines and pedagogical strategies for teaching cultural competence in relation to Indigenous Australians in undergraduate psychology.

The project team had an already established, extensive and well-developed national communication network which continued to grow over the two year life-span of the project. The first national workshop which was held in 2005 generated an e-mail list of 150 participants who wished to be informed about the project and its developments. Due to the success and demand for information about indigenising the curriculum, another workshop was organised in 2006. Both of these workshops provided a foundation of knowledge and an extensive communication portal for information to be disseminated nationally. Through the continual dissemination process of 2007-2008, the project was constantly building a network of interested/committed institutions and individuals. This network has now grown to over 1000 email addresses (Ranzijn et al. 2008 p.23).



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Key questions for consideration

- What methods will be used to facilitate an effective team?
- How/where is key project information to be held?
- Who are key stakeholders? What are their information needs?
- What are the best channels for communication
- Who is responsible for key communications? Is there a timeframe?
- Who deals with feed back?
- How do we assess the quality and effectiveness of communications?
- How will issues arising in the project be dealt with? Who will determine the priority?
- How will decisions be made?
- What are the costs involved in the communication strategy adopted?
- What are the costs or risks to the project of not meeting key stakeholders information needs?



Appendix - Project Communication Strategy Action Plan Example

<Project Title> Communication Strategy Action Plan

Target Audience/ Stakeholder Group	Aim	Communication Tools	Who to Action?	By When?	Costs?
Identify the Target Audience by considering the following: Who will benefit from the project? Who are the Key Stakeholders? Who are the stakeholder groups and the target audience within them?	What do you intend to communicate to the stakeholder(s) groups? What are the key points stakeholder(s) groups need to understand and act upon?	What communication method /tools are most appropriate for the stakeholder(s) groups? e.g. electronic, verbal written.	Who will be responsible for implementing each action?	When must the action be implemented?	What are the costs associated with each action?

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