The Project Manager Leadership Dilemma:
Candid versus Creative Communications

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Abstract

A key responsibility of the project manager is to communicate reality during project execution. Candid communication exhibited with brutal honesty may cause the project manager to be executed prematurely. Alternatively, the project manager as political spin-doctor spews creative deceit about project progress and performance. The paper addresses the communication challenges and ethical leadership dilemmas that confront the project manager, and proposes suggestions for astute project communications and project stakeholder management.

Introduction

Groucho Marx opined "I'm not crazy about Reality, but it's still the only place to get a decent meal." How is reality communicated during project execution, both visually and virtually? Should the project manager communicate with brutal honesty, or alternatively, become a political spin-doctor spewing creative deceit about project progress and performance? Are there better ways to move a project forward? Is it a case of the Project Manager being honest, reasonable, and/or pragmatic? What is the truth-reality for the Project Manager? The paper considers this conundrum of candid versus creative communications that confront the project manager.

Being transparent in the business world means to be “free from pretense or deceit” (www.m-w.com). This transparency requires the ethical project manager to be completely honest in managing people and their projects. The Project Management Institute’s Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct is “specific about the basic obligation of responsibility, respect, fairness, and honesty” (PM/BOK, p. 29). However, can the project stakeholders truly handle the truth without executing the messenger – the Project Manager?

This paper addresses these communication challenges and the ethical leadership dilemmas that challenge the project manager as functions of proper project communications and astute project stakeholder management. The paper includes a series of tips and suggestions for astute project communications and project stakeholder management based on a collection of lessons learned.

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The Culture of Project Communications

The project organization culture is formed by the project stakeholders, both proponents and team participants, which influences greatly the particular project’s communication procedures and practices. The preferred behaviors for a successful project manager include being honest, open, trustworthy and co-operative. These personal virtues are all functions of the professional trait of exhibiting strong personal communications. Likewise, the core managerial skills of leadership, decision making and motivation are rooted in project communications. Irrespective of the quality of the project manager’s management acumen and personal attributes, the project may still fail if the proper balance of team dynamics, executive support and customer satisfaction are not executed properly (Cerimagic, 2010). Savvy management of project communications is critical for project success, which requires an in-depth understanding of both the project manager’s role [the medium] as well as the importance of accurate project communications [the message].

Programs and projects continue to mega-size themselves in scope complexity with corresponding gargantuan communication issues. In the Japan heavy-construction industry, the “monodukuri” mega-projects (i.e., construction of oil and gas development, infrastructure and industrial facilities) is being affected either positively or negatively by a variety of complexities categorized by P.E.S.T.L.E. (political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental) factors.

To address these complexities, Tanaka (2014) proposed a conceptual model of an enterprise viability system reinforced by meta-program management. The meta-program management approach intends to balance multiple, competing project objectives through stakeholder engagement and knowledge sharing when scoping the complex projects. In addition, the simultaneous financial planning, organizational structuring, and contingent risk management, all elaborated with continuing feedbacks, are considered essential ingredients of materializing the complex project. Candid, fluid communications are essential for this new paradigm of project management. [Refer to Figure 1: Integration of multiple elements of knowledge held by multiple stakeholders is illustrated in Figure 1.]
Although people claim otherwise, humans are not always rational actors. Ongoing research by Johansen, Erik-Andersen and Ekambaran (2014) on project uncertainty assessment shows that stakeholders are subjective and influenced by the project objectives more than expected. The researchers conclude that projects, to a small extent, find opportunities because risk and opportunity identification processes are comingled. The research postulated that projects can find and exploit opportunities and benefits to a greater extent if they use a defined opportunity management process.

The Value of Trust in Communications

During the Watergate hearings, an interesting retort made by Rep. Earl F. Landgrebe (R-IN) was “Don’t confuse me with the facts. I’ve got a closed mind.” (Wallenchinsky & Wallace (2005). A Freudian slip or prophetic irony; many executives would rather take the ostrich approach to facing project problems, issues and concerns. The project manager is challenged with establishing open communications channels for the team to function adequately. Trust, the
critical ingredient for open and honest communications, will help ensure a high performing cooperative and collaborative organization to function. The ethical project manager, one who is worthy of the trust of their stakeholders, must interface with integrity with their direct reports [the project team], their executive sponsors and clients, the external suppliers and contractors, the intended end-users/customers, the government, the public, etc. Moreover, trust is critical for group cohesion. A third of the respondents on a research study cite a lack of honest communications as the top detriment to office morale (NHBR, 2013).

To err is human – To blame it on someone else is really human

Construction projects are especially prone to ills of unethical conduct by the project participants. At various times, construction projects, from the mega-large to the small remodeling project, are populated with unscrupulous contractors behaving unethically and illegally. Driven by greed, these conniving contractors play at the expense of the unfortunate facility owner and tarnish the reputation of the entire design-procurement-construction industry and the cadre of honest, ethical construction professionals. Negligence and problems include poor quality documents, poor workmanship, poor material quality, inadequate safety standards on the site (Carden & Boyd, 2012). Moreover, the lack of trust is a key factor affecting the relationship between the major entities involved including: the facility owner with the designer [Architect/Engineer], the owner with the constructor [construction manager / general contractor], and, the major contractors with the sub-contractors and suppliers (White & Marasini, 2014). Although the project manager will not ‘earn points’ for candidly telling the truth, the distrustful PM will definitely lose when caught in creatively communicating a web of untruths, dishonest transgressions and downright lies.

Don’t complain, don’t explain

Automotive projects face similar challenges in obtaining ethical communications on complex projects. Difficulties include managing cross-company product development projects without clearly defined project goals and business alignment. Shifting to decentralized and distributed teams affords increased collaboration and improves project transparency. However, the challenges of accurately measuring status offsets these gains. Utilizing a collaborative project scorecard [CPS] augmented with trustful communications helps improve the cross-company project management performance. The focus of the proposed CPS is the collaboration between project members, and is based on a “collaboration” instead of a “customer” perspective. The CPS aligns collaborative project objectives with the corporate portfolio and business strategies of each participating project entity (OEM, 1st tier suppliers, sub-suppliers, etc.) Collaboration and effective communications are key performance indices [KPI] measures in the CPS mix (Niebecker, Eager & Kuitza, 2008).

Ignorance is no excuse

Honest and open communications among the collaborators is essential for project success. Like mindedness concerning project goals is augmented with diversity in team talents and viewpoints. Collaborative decision making is, at times, more emotional than completely logical. It is crucial
to ensure trust and shared goals to ensure collaborative cooperation (Ochterski, 2013). The project manager needs to steer the project ship of team mates through the perilous seas of project detractors with transparent communications.

The Promise and the Peril of Project Transparency

The project manager is tasked with balancing her/his candid remarks within creative messaging to effectively communicate the good to great, the not-so-good, the bad tending to worse, and the downright ugly, all in a cohesively succinct memorandum of a single page. Although the project manager intends to exhibit transparency in her/his dealings with others, the level of sophistication and experience of the stakeholder is an important consideration. The project manager is typically the eternal optimist. As the message-sender, the project manager may unwittingly tend to exaggerate project accomplishments and forecasted problems. The skeptical executive/project sponsor, as message-receiver, downplays the PM’s report including both the current status and the “cry for assistance” request, clustering the multiple messages to the detriment of both. Unfortunately perturbing for the project success, communications research shows that the naïve executive will respond to the more exaggerated claims by the honest project manager with more moderate actions (Chen, 2011).

Take the bull by the tail and face the situation

The project manager is often faced with deciding whether to communicate in complete candor versus infusing some deceptive remarks. Sakamoto, Laine and Farber (2013) researched project-level / strategic decisions made by the project managers in regards to the PMs using potentially deceptive communications in presenting their decision results. The research found this scenario to be a considerably complex situation to model, and difficult in predicting and analyzing the outcomes. The costs-and-benefits of candid [honest] versus creative [deceptive] communication scenarios are not directly comparable. This includes the probability that the deception will be detected and the fallout / potential reward with the “failed” [found-out] versus a successful deception. The “candid versus creative” communication equation requires a review of three key factors that include one’s personal justification for the deceit, perceived benefits of a successful deception, and the individual’s personal utility concerning honesty and integrity. The project manager faced with the probability of a certain loss [the costs] will consider all the noted factors. Conversely, the project manager certain of their successful deception does not weigh these factors in ascribing their personal gain [the benefits] (Sakamoto, et al 2013). As Ernest Hemingway opined about morality, “So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.” (Ernest Hemingway, Death in the Afternoon).

Not to decide is to decide

Conversely, a study by Missonier & Lufrani-Fedida (2014) investigated the stakeholder analysis and engagement on IS project management. The authors proposed “a relevant conceptual approach by moving from a stakeholder relational perspective, anchored in recent studies on
Social Network Theory, to a stakeholder relational ontology, anchored in Actor–Network Theory (ANT) (p.1108).” Interestingly, the ANT construct of project stakeholders' analysis considers both the dynamic and emergent nature of project relationships. As projects trudge through their life-cycle, the nature, roles, and relations between stakeholders co-evolve in tandem with the constant changes in the project's scope and stakeholder expectations. Consequently, the vigilant project manager must be adept in assessing and reacting astutely to the oscillating relationships that ensue.

Competencies for Ethical Project Communications

Facetiously, many executives consider the prime purpose for employing a project manager as the single point contact as their single throat to choke. Working in the midst of turmoil, the project manager must never allow senior management to be surprised. The project manager is the point person responsible for project success, who cheers the team-wins when the project is a success, and accepts the blame when failure looms. Above all, the project manager must be able to communicate with the entire project stakeholders with skill and grace (Meredith & Mantel, 2012).

Various research studies on the leadership competencies of successful project managers profile three major leadership dimensions: intellectual (IQ), managerial (MQ) and emotional (EQ). Muller & Turner (2010) found critical thinking (an IQ sub-dimension), and, influence, motivation and conscientiousness (EQ sub-dimensions) as highly indicated in successful project managers in all types of projects. Interestingly, the MQ dimension of “engaging communications” was considered essential [rated high] for transformational situations and very important [rated medium] for transitional organizations and stable contexts. A similar study by Galvin, Gibbs, Sullivan and Williams (2014) on leadership competencies of successful project managers found common results with the MQ dimension of “engaging communications” with the majority of the project leaders communicating in a way befitting their team’s needs. In addition, the surveyed industries that most stressed communications skills include military/law, customer services and entertainment/theater, and, strong communication skills play a huge role regardless of the leadership style.

A study by Skulmoski, & Hartman (2009) on the soft competencies for Information System project managers considered “communication” as one of the key categories for review. The study measured eight (8) communication attributes against the IS project phases of initiation, planning, implementation and closeout. The research results showed “effective questioning / generating feedback” and “listening” as the most critical communication skills during both the initiation and the planning phases. During the implementation phase, “open communications” is most important. In the closeout phase, “writing skills” is the most important communication competency. The research finds that the important competencies for the project manager are dynamic rather than static; as the required tasks change in each phase, so do the required competencies. Interestingly, ethical project communications is an important attribute of the major soft skills competencies for the project manager in each phase.
In a similar study, Fisher (2011) reviewed the skills and behaviors of an effective people project manager. The study’s literature review and face-to-face interviews identified the importance of effective communications. However, the other data collection method [focus groups] did not identify effective communications as critically important. The study results showed similar conclusions on the need for effective communications as an integral part of the other project manager skills, such as, good leadership and influencing skills. The survey results rank orders the essential people project manager skills as: 1) managing emotions, 2) building trust, 4) effective communication, 5) motivating others, 6) influencing others, 7) cultural awareness, 8) leading others, and 9) team building. [Table 1 in the Appendix details the six specific skills and behaviors of an effective people project manager.]

The role of the “flow-keeper” is an additional skill for the successful project manager, which hinges on ethical project communications (Masiello, 2009). On highly complex projects, the “flow keeper” project manager functions in a broad coalition with disparate cultures, multiple languages, and differences in the level of technical knowledge and available technology. In addition, the varying levels of social competencies, experiences, ideals and ambitions of the team members give rise to proverbial cultural clashes and a dysfunctional project team. To succeed in this environment, the project manager must be culturally aware and hold social skills redefined to understand and endure culture differences.

Learning Project Communication Lessons from Project Lessons Learned

There is no perfect model to follow for astute project communications and project stakeholder management. Instead, a compendium of lessons learned on project communications from a variety of sources on project communications is offered. The lessons learned are gained from the school of hard knocks in managing many projects from hell, instructing classes of unwilling pragmatists and enthusiastic amateurs, and, attempting to satisfy project sponsors who have no idea what they are requesting nor what they really need.

Chiu (2012) lists ten tips for smart project managers, which includes three tips mirrored in effective communications – frame the message, manage the bad news, and, communicate / communicate / communicate. In framing the message, the project manager must be mindful of the context and presentation as well as the content. The message must be balanced in tone with a focus on the project objectives. Prompt action is always necessary when dealing with bad news. The responsible project manager must deliver the accurate message and tell it prior to someone else doing it [probably incorrectly] for them. The smart project manager communicates the proper message, in a timely manner, with sufficient follow up, and requests feedback on a regular basis to ensure the message is received. (A complete list of the ten tips is in Table 2 in the Appendix.)

Close consideration of the project manager’s communication skills will inevitably improve the outcome of the project. The personal characteristics a project manager uses to ensure successful communication should be in sync with the PM’s leadership style that she/he applies during
project execution (Zulch, 2014). These communication characteristics including active listening, giving clear directions, requesting feedback, and being open to honest criticism. The astute project manager adapts their leadership style according to the particular situation and communicates accordingly.

Project management practice has long acknowledged the need for professional development of future project managers, especially the importance of education in human skills. Several Spanish universities have achieved very good results in using experiential learning to help develop their engineering students’ communication competencies while they are studying Project Management. The communications learning framework combines theoretical concepts, class projects carried out by multidisciplinary student teams from the three universities, use of software web 2.0 tools, and role play exercises. Interestingly, the results of the course learning outcomes indicate students playing the role of “Project Manager” strengthen their communication skills more than those ones participating in the role of “Team Member” (Ortiz-Marcos, Uruburu, Cobo & Prieto, 2013). Constructivist learning (hands-on) does lead to greater student satisfaction and improved learning on project-based subjects (Moylan, 2008).

However, there is an apparent lack of emphasis placed on people skills within the context of university education (Baroudi, 2008). In addition to course topics on the mechanics of project communications, there are many academic courses available on human skills and professional communications. These human skills courses are normally not part of the required core; rather, they are electives to augment a degree. As a professor of construction project management, the writer requires his students to give one formal [graded] oral presentation in each course. Although additional courses in human skills and professional communications are encouraged, youth is wasted on the young.

Conclusions

When caught in a very embarrassing situation, Henry Ford II [aka Hank the Deuce], the legendary automotive industry mogul, opined bluntly “no apologies / no excuses.” This catch phrase became the theme of his leadership style: be candid in telling the truth, hold people accountable, take responsibility for team mistakes, and move on.

The project manager leadership dilemma of candid versus creative communications can be best solved by following an authentic leadership style. The ethical values of open and honest communications include active listening, giving clear directions, requesting feedback, and being open to honest criticism. The astute project manager adapts their leadership style according to the particular situation and communicates accordingly, blending their communications skills and behaviors to meet the situation.

The PM will not earn points for being truthful, but will definitely lose if they lie. The savvy management of project communications is critical for project success, which requires an in-depth understanding of both the project manager’s role [the medium] as well as the importance of accurate project communications [the message].
References


### APPENDIX

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<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding behavioral characteristics</td>
<td>Be genuine and open and honest with others. Show openly that you believe in your team members' abilities. Show an open and authentic concern for others that is based on true feelings and not on invented ones. Develop an understanding of the relationship between behaviors and feelings and how you can make this work for you in your teams. Adopt a repertoire of behaviors so you can deal with people in different situations and circumstances.</td>
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<td>Leading others</td>
<td>Show a high level of motivation towards innovation to inspire others to become more creative and innovative. Adopt a leadership style that is appropriate to the situation, for example, situational, transitional, visionary or charismatic. Ensure that your team members comply with your wishes. Apply directive, firm or demanding behaviors according to the attitudes and behaviors of your team members.</td>
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<td>Influencing others</td>
<td>Convince, influence or impress others in order to support their agenda, or the desire to have a specific impact or effect on others. Influence others by selling them the benefit, for example, why they should change so they can see the benefit and make the appropriate changes to their behavior or attitude. Share with others what it feels like to work in a highly successful team so they adopt the behaviors that are associated with success. Influence team members to unblock the values and beliefs people have to help them develop better. Share with others what it feels like to work in a highly-valued team.</td>
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<td>Authentic behavior</td>
<td>Show open concern for others. Accept people for what they are and do not try to force them to change. Empower people by delegating tasks to them and ask them to take on board more responsibilities. Develop an understanding of what makes the other person tick and what is important to that person. Show genuine concerns and feelings for the needs of others. Make people feel good about work, themselves, others and the project itself.</td>
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<td>Conflict management</td>
<td>Establish the root causes of the conflict by talking to others openly and honestly to find out. Concentrate on the work issues and do not get personal. Show loyalty, integrity, trust, help and support when dealing with conflicts. Be tolerant and prepared to compromise. Observe behaviors of team members to sense early when conflicts begin to develop, and then take corrective actions to resolve these.</td>
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<td>Cultural awareness</td>
<td>Develop, display and apply an awareness of the cultural differences of team members. Show an understanding and knowledge of the values and beliefs of other cultures. Adapt some of other people's own home country behaviors appropriate to the situation when managing people from diverse cultures. Adopt cultural awareness behaviors to manage people in their projects effectively. Show an open optimism about cultural differences and show views that confirm that you see cultural diversity as an enhancement to your own values and beliefs.</td>
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**Table 2**

Six specific skills and behaviors of an effective people project manager  
Fisher (2011), p. 1000
THE TEN TIPS

Project management involves much more than the technical steps outlined in standardized procedures. Even experienced project managers would benefit from keeping the following key points, which are explained in this article, in mind:

1. Manage the uncertainty
2. Educate the client
3. Manage the culture
4. Acknowledge the limitations
5. Frame the message
6. Manage the bad news
7. Communicate, communicate, communicate
8. Manage what you know
9. Finish the job
10. Stay connected to the business objectives

Table 2: The 10 Tips
Chiu (2012), p. 42
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Dr. William A. Moylan, PhD, PMP, FESD, DTM is an educator, consultant, trainer, expert witness and practitioner in project management and Construction Engineering. He is an Associate Professor in Construction Management at Eastern Michigan University. Dr. Moylan has extensive professional experience in all aspects of program and project management, including over eleven years internationally with the Arabian American Oil Co, and since 1983 has been involved in implementing information technology. Dr. Moylan received his BS in Construction Engineering from Lawrence Technological University; his Masters from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, majoring in Project Management and minor ing in International Business, and, his Ph.D. in Organization and Management with a specialization in Leadership from Capella University. Dr. Moylan is active in a variety of professional societies including PMI, ESD and Toastmasters International. Dr. Moylan can be contacted at wmoylan@emich.edu.

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Dr. Loren W. Walker, DMIT, PMP, passed away unexpectedly on November 25, 2014 from an apparent heart attack. Loving husband of Susan for 32 years and beloved father of Adam and Barbara Walker. Dr. Walker worked in the Computer Science and Information Systems field for nearly 30 years. He was an Adjunct and Full-time professor in information systems and the social sciences. He specialized in consulting and teaching High-Level Programming Languages (C, C++, Java, and .Net Technologies), Systems Analysis & Design, Project Management, Web Design, Programming Technologies and Enterprise Architecture. He was a full Professor at Capella University [a premiere distance learning university based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA], and served as the Project Management Lead Core Faculty for Capella’s Masters and Undergraduate programs, which included responsibility for all PM course content and directing all adjunct instructors in the Project Management discipline. The proposal abstract for the original paper was submitted to the University of Maryland by Dr. Moylan and him shortly before his untimely passing. Susan Walker can be contacted at mksusanw@aol.com