

Communicating Projects
An End-to-End Guide to Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Effective Communication
 By Ann Pilkington
 (A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMP)

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Introduction

We have always thought that the topic of "communications" in projects has been sadly under-represented. True it has always been a part of the Project Management Body of Knowledge¹ since the beginning, but that description was limited to planning, organizing, commanding, directing, and controlling communication together with the processes, skills and styles for performing these activities. To whom the communications were to be made was touched on briefly, but essentially focused on the immediate project environment in which the communications were to take place.

Early in the PMBOK study phase it was intended that the topic should also encompass information management, i.e. storage and retrieval of data for example. This vital area for efficient management of a project unfortunately never happened. Today, five iterations later, the PMBOK[®] Guide² still does not deal with the essential work of information storage and retrieval beyond a passing mention. Instead, it has expanded Project Communications Management in detail and rigor as a system, but principally on the what-and-when of project-driven reporting.

However, the Fifth Edition has introduced a whole new section, *Project Stakeholder Management*, where project stakeholders are the recipients of the aforementioned communications. The general thrust of these new texts is heavily process driven but still focused principally on those directly involved in the project. That is, even though the term "stakeholder"³ is defined broadly and used liberally, the major thrust still appears to be on informing project sponsors, team members and suppliers of goods and services.

So, looking for a more worldview of the subject, we embarked on author Ann Pilkington's book, *Communicating Projects*, with great anticipation. To give some idea of the approach taken by this author, a couple of extracts from the Foreword by Mary McKinlay⁴ are worth Quoting:⁵

"In the past few weeks I have attended conferences and heard a variety of speakers talking about the problems that Chief Executive Officers regard as most pressing. Top of the list comes 'Management of Change' – and when we explore why this is so difficult, the issue is one of keeping people informed and persuading them to co-operate"

And:

"Every staff survey that is produced in companies around the world has a major theme in the results: '***Nobody keeps us informed, we are not consulted***'." [Emphasis added]

The implication is that the workforce and others have not been given the opportunity to ask questions, to provide their feedback, and to satisfy themselves that they have been listened to.

Right off the bat, author Ann Pilkington contemplates a project role of "project communicator" which she introduces in the first paragraph of her Preface as follows:⁶

"It is acknowledged widely that good communication is important to project success but

what does good communication look like? This book sets out to answer this question with guidance that will be useful for the project manager and the *project communicator*."
[Emphasis added]

Ann adds that large-scale projects probably have the luxury of experienced people available as and when needed. However, on smaller projects communications may be the responsibility of just one person, possibly without previous experience. As she says:⁷

"This presents a serious risk to project success, particularly when communication is viewed as a one-way activity that is more about 'sending stuff out' than true two-way engagement with stakeholders."

However, Ann acknowledges that:

"Of course it will never be possible to please all of the stakeholders all of the time, but an understanding of how people process communication will help."

About the author

Ann Pilkington moved from a career in journalism into press and public relations with major blue chip companies including British Telecom, the Automobile Association, The Woolwich and Barclays bank. She left Barclays to teach and pursue a freelance career in change communications on major programs within the public sector. Subsequently, she co-founded PR Academy that provides education and training for communicators. She teaches a range of courses covering internal and external communications and also provides consultancy services.

Book Structure

The content of this book is set out in seven chapters as follows:

1. Setting Out
This chapter discusses the different options for setting up a communication function, strategic rather than tactical.
2. Developing the Strategy
With a communication function in place, this chapter emphasizes the importance of planning and thinking strategically before beginning to develop content and communicating.
3. Who are Our Stakeholders?
This chapter highlights the importance of, and approach to, identifying, prioritizing and engaging with stakeholders from a project perspective
4. Creating Great Content
While often considered the "fun part", it is important that content delivers the objective of the strategy in a form appropriate to the stakeholder under consideration.
5. Selecting the Right Channel and Tactic
How something is said is as important as what is said, and must be appropriate to the content.
6. Creating Plans
Good communication relies on planning. A good communication strategy is nothing without a plan to deliver and a plan is of no value without a strategy to guide it. Time on planning is well spent.
7. Research and Evaluation
characterizes three project roles: input to formulate the strategy; monitoring of communication performance to verify achievement; and closeout research as a contribution to lessons learned.

Most chapters conclude with a brief summary of the chapter's content, and several chapters include brief "vignettes" as illustrations of the previous contents. The book is well illustrated with Figures, explanatory Tables and Templates. It concludes with a section on *References and Further Reading*, and has a total of just 175 pages. It does not include a Glossary of Terms.

What we liked

It is refreshing to come across a book on *how* to communicate *from a project perspective*, rather than what all the various system elements of project communications management consists of. The book presents an end-to-end framework for program and project managers to develop an effective strategy for bringing about stakeholder engagement and even behavior change. The sequence of the chapters listed in the previous section reflects the progressive nature of this communications framework. This framework, and hence the book's recommendations, adjust according to the phase in the project's life span to be most effective at all times.

The book also includes a number of templates, hints and tips to support corresponding tactics. In so doing, author Ann Pilkington hopes to raise the profile of communication within the project management setting and, at the same time, make the effort much more likely to help bring about project success. She notes that project communication doesn't fit neatly into any of the traditional communication disciplines. Instead, it draws on all of them, e.g. marketing, advertising, media and public relations, which is why the task is so much more rewarding for the communicator, whether that is the project manager or one of his/her delegates.⁸

Ann suggests that the ideal scenario is for the "project communicator" to be involved in the project from the outset.⁹ But if not, time must still be taken to ensure that there is a common understanding of the role, including its boundaries and so on. Nevertheless, effective communication in presenting to the project's public is a powerful tool bringing recognition and esteem to the communicator. Therefore, there is a serious risk that the communicator may appear to usurp the authority of the project manager, especially if there is a significant difference in personality traits between the two.

As an interesting example, Ann introduces the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).¹⁰ She notes that: "Understanding personality types can be helpful in designing effective communication". She explains that: "A typical difference in communication style can be a preference for detail compared to a preference for theory and concepts."¹¹

From our experience, such a difference is not unusual in the makeup of a project team. Anyway, Ann illustrates this with the following amusing Vignette:¹²

"Project manager: 'Which stakeholders received our latest communication?'

Communication lead: 'Everyone'

The project manager, exasperated, wonders why her communication lead is being so evasive. The communication lead, annoyed by the form of the question, wonders why the project manager feels that she needs to check on him all the time.

The communication lead later finds out about their opposing MBTI profiles. Next time the project manager asks the question he responds by saying: 'Everyone on our stakeholder list received it, that's 200 in total covering managers down to grade B in the finance and procurement communities.'

'Thank you, that's great' says the project manager.

'You're welcome' says the communication lead."

The book is full of good advice in the form of bulleted lists and tables. For example:

- Do take an audience/stakeholder-centred approach;
- Do provide accurate and timely information;¹³
- Do not massage the ego of the project manager;
- Do not try to make a bad decision look like a good one;¹⁴

And so on

In another section, Ann provides good basic advice on Effective Presentations as a part of the project communicator's tool kit. Here she says for example:¹⁵

- Speakers must introduce themselves;
- Never use a font size of less than 18 point;
- If the presenter has to accompany a slide with 'I know you can't read this but . . .' then that is a slide that should not be used; and
- At the end of the presentation, sum up the key points and let members of the audience know what the project wants them to do with the knowledge that they now have.

What a concept! How many presentations have you been to recently that breeches at least three of those four alone, all in the one presentation?

But the book is not constricted to such minutiae as just described. For example, Chapter 5 concludes with a long table that provides a guide to some of the most popular communication channels and gives tips for their use.¹⁶ The table contains content – describing in each case: advantages/disadvantage; one way or two way; good for; and tips for use – ranges through Email, Intranet, team meetings, weekly 'stand up' sessions, video conferencing and more.

Downside

It is difficult to find fault with the book as written. However, there are a few aspects where one might wish for more insights. Given that for most projects, i.e. those that are in the smaller range, are called to meet tight budgets, expansion of project responsibilities seems unlikely. That is not to suggest that communication is unneeded, on the contrary, effective communication is essential, but only internally within the project.

In the broader view of the communication discipline, the issue is where should this responsibility reside. Other than the internal communication needed to run the project itself, it seems to us that responsibility at this increased scope of the discipline should all be held at a higher level. This includes such activities as e-bulletins, podcasts, newsletters, company notice board announcements, focus groups and 'Town Halls', all of which are mentioned in the book.

Such activities are time consuming, and could easily divert the project manager's attention from "getting the job done". Our suggestion is that these activities should be the responsibility of a program management office (PMO), if there is one. If not, it should be the responsibility of the project's sponsor to arrange under the umbrella of the corporate organization, rather than under the project umbrella. After all, if the project is that important, it should be supported at the highest level.

On large projects where the outcome has an impact on the public-at-large, and politics are inevitably

involved, a major communications effort is essential to the success of the project. In such cases, the "project communicator" role is typically vested in a public relations office. Such an office could be an arm of the overall program organization, or conducted under a standing unit of the corporate organization such as a project portfolio management office. It would be interesting to have the author's views on these options and rationale for one or the other.

It must be remembered that information is power and those who hold it can use it to exercise significant influence. Influence is a valuable asset in managing a project. Often, on a project, people have to be persuaded to act at short notice. So the transfer of information handling from the project manager to some "outsider" not only undermines the position of the project manager, but the perpetrator can be seen as an interfering busybody. The author does touch briefly on the potential conflict between the project manager and the designated communicator,¹⁷ but we would like to have seen an expansion of this topic.

And lastly, Ann's suggestions for encouraging the difficult skill of active listening would be welcome.

Summary

Author Ann Pilkington's book, *Communicating Projects*, is a valuable addition to the project management literature. It takes a somewhat laid-back approach to the role of a "communicator" working in a project environment, yet deals with a large number of the issues that typically face project managers and their teams in every-day project work.

The book is well written in a clear, light easy reading style, well balanced between text, bullets, tables and graphics. In our view it contains sound and realistic advice on project communications that integrates well with the traditional view of the unfolding project life span.

R. Max Wideman
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¹ *Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK), Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 1987

² *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition, Project Management Institute, Inc., PA, USA, 2013, pp 287-308

³ in the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition, "Stakeholder" is defined as: "An individual, group, or organization who may affect, be affected by, or perceived itself to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of the project." Glossary p563

⁴ Mary McKinlay FAPM, Trustee and Board Member APM, Adjunct Professor, SKEMA France

⁵ Pilkington, Ann, *Communicating Projects An End-to-End Guide to Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Effective Communication*, Gower Publishing Limited, Surrey, England, 2013, Foreword, p xi

⁶ *Ibid*, p xiii

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ *Ibid*, see Table 1.1 on p5

⁹ *Ibid*, p1

¹⁰ You can read more about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator from a project perspective here:

<http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/profiles/intro.htm>

¹¹ *Ibid*, p110

¹² *Ibid*, p111

¹³ *Ibid*, p3

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p4

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p132

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp 124-131

¹⁷ See the Vignette quoted in the previous section.