

Interpersonal Communication: Key Competencies for Enterprise Project Management

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The discipline of project management is growing at a rapid pace. Research describing best practices is emerging from both university and applied settings. Training in project management techniques and applications is also increasing, through professional organizations such as the Project Management Institute (www.pmi.org).

However, technological advances in project management are not sufficient for enterprise project management success. The project manager also needs to develop specific skills and competencies in the “people skills” side of project management.

This paper will discuss two specific people skills that are key to success in enterprise project management. These skills involve the ability to apply four distinct interpersonal communication techniques when working with stakeholders, plus the ability to apply two subtle communication frameworks to any communication. The paper will conclude with thoughts on how project managers can develop increasingly greater levels of competency in these skills.

The Importance of People Skills

For a number of years, the author has been espousing the importance of the “people skills” component of enterprise project management (Flannes, 1998). The author has written extensively on the subject (Flannes and Levin, 2001), as well as having lead two day training workshops in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom for project managers on the subject of people skills acquisitions.

During these workshops, project managers have repeatedly said that people issues are their greatest source of problems and stress in bringing projects to completion within the parameters of schedule, cost, and specifications.

Why are people skills so important for enterprise project success? A number of factors

contribute to this issue. Specifically, the people aspect of managing a project has been made more difficult because of the increase in the use of virtual teams (Rad and Levin, 2003), in which complex activities must be completed through interacting with team members operating from different cultures, disciplines, and time zones. Grantham (2000) cites that this increase in virtual teams and a distributed workplace calls upon the project manager to gain more sophistication in various interpersonal and people skills. And recently, well known management consultant and leadership development specialist Tom Peters, writing on the subject of what contributes to project manager success, has stated “These days, it’s the people skills that matter and will increasingly determine an organization’s success.” (Peters, 2004).

Interpersonal Communication Techniques

The foundation for all people skills is the ability to communicate effectively on interpersonal levels, regardless of whether the communication is taking place between two people in the same room or between two members of a virtual team operating from distant locations.

It has been the author’s experience (Flannes, 2004) that most individuals, regardless of country of origin, have grown up in families, societies, and cultures in which minimal emphasis has been placed on educating people on effective interpersonal communication skills. All too frequently, such training generally is confined to educational programs in the counseling or helping professions.

This lack of education or training in interpersonal communication really surfaces when one is in situations, such as project work, where different styles of people are interacting under the umbrella of time pressures and possible conflicting agendas. At these moments, technical competency often takes a back seat to people skill competency in assisting the project manager in completing the task at hand.

Presented below are four types of interpersonal communication techniques that have proven very effective in project work. These skills are the ability to:

- 1 Ask open-ended questions
- 2 Apply active listening
- 3 Track a discussion
- 4 Reframe a negative conversation

Regardless of one’s current level of skill or comfort in these skills, one can make significant gains in one’s competency and comfort. To do so, one must practice these approaches, preferably in both formal settings (work, team meetings, etc.) and in informal settings (with family, at social gatherings, etc.).

Now, let’s discuss the specific attributes of each of these four communication skills.

Open-Ended Questions

As the name suggests, open-ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with a “yes” or a “no.” These questions are good at drawing out people and giving them a sense that you are interested in what they have to say. Such questions encourage conversation, the exploration of ideas, and the give-and-take between people.

Example: *"Bill, please tell me more of your thoughts about X."*

As this example illustrates, an open-ended question is used to create an expansive dialogue between the two individuals. This approach can also give you some additional time to formulate your own thoughts on the issue in question.

A very valuable application of this approach is the situation where you are dealing with a quiet, uncommunicative team member, and you need to draw them out so that you can gain more knowledge about the status of their work.

As with all communication techniques, open-ended questions, when applied too often, can result in negative results. For example, by continually using open-ended questions in the same discussion, the project manager runs the risk of not being action oriented (getting to the end point of the conversation) and may also appear ineffective as a leader. Also, keep in mind that in certain cultures, open-ended questions may elicit a defensive response from the individual who perceives this type of question as prying or condescending.

Active Listening

Here, the skill is to give feedback to the other person that indicates that you are hearing his or her message and that you are following what he or she is saying. This technique is very effective in developing followership and communicating that you are interested in what the other person is saying.

Also, this communication approach is valuable in making sure both parties are in agreement as to what is being said during the discussion. All too often, team members leave project meetings with inaccurate views of what was decided during the meeting; active listening helps the parties make sure they have heard each other accurately, reducing project errors.

Example: *"Gene, it sounds as though you believe X, Y, and Z about the proposal."*

By using active listening in this example, the project manager is making certain that she understands Gene's statements, thus giving the two of them a solid understanding from which they can continue discussing the situation at hand.

Use active listening selectively. If used too often, you may be perceived as a project manager who is not active enough and who does not offer suggestions or assistance.

Tracking the Discussion

Poor communication often occurs when the involved individuals are talking about two or more issues at once, and have lost track of the original point of this discussion. This frequently takes place in team meetings, where one issue after another is inserted into the discussion, with the result being frustration, and the experience of not getting anything resolved. When this happens in a discussion, the discussion can be viewed as having gotten “off-track.”

The skill of tracking a discussion involves the ability to follow the direction and subject of the discussion, and offer supportive comments when the flow of the conversation is getting off point. This tracking of the communication assists the parties in conducting meaningful, goal-directed conversations.

Example: *"Barbara, I think my comments have gotten us off point. Let's get back to what you were saying about X."*

One must be able to be assertive when using the tracking the communication technique. In other words, one must be willing to actively, forthrightly, step into the middle of a dysfunctional discussion and say something that moves the parties back on point. Many times, however, when one notices that the discussion is going off track, there can be a tendency to passively sit back and hope that it returns to its original focus. Unfortunately, that rarely happens.

A project manager not willing to use this tracking approach runs the risk of being perceived by team members as weak and ineffective. Team member respect also suffers when project managers allow discussions to repeatedly get off track.

Reframing the Discussion

Every project manager has probably worked with the team member with a negative attitude. This team member usually is very good at pointing out why something cannot be done, and appears to bring little creative thinking to the process of finding ways around obstacles. Clearly, this type of team member can be very frustrating for the project manager.

Fortunately, the communication approach of “reframing” can be helpful in dealing with this type of team member. When using this skill, one is taking a negative perception, outlook or attitude of the other person and is trying to put a more positive “frame” around the issue, attempting to create more optimism and action-taking on the part of the negative individual.

Example: Person A says *"Every time I call for software support, I get no help or some type of very poor service!"*

Person B reframes the issue with a more positive “frame” by saying *"Well, yes, that has*

often been true in the past, but I understand they have hired some new staff. Possibly this time you'll receive a better reception when you call."

The goal of reframing is to help the individual see more possibilities to solving the problem, creating a sense of "possibility," without the project manager feeling that he or she needs to come up with the solution for the team member.

An Awareness of Communication Subtleties

The previously described interpersonal communication skills (open-ended questions, active listening, tracking the communication, reframing the discussion), serve as the project manager's foundation for more sophisticated people skills. This next section will look at a "window" through which any communication situation can be viewed. By having an awareness of this window, the project manager will have even more ability to effectively work with stakeholders in the subtle people communication aspects of enterprise project management.

This subtle aspect of viewing communication is the ability to think about communication from the dual perspective of the communication's process and the communication's content.

Process and Content Awareness

Any communication has both process levels and content levels.

The content level is the level that is most easily recognized, as it deals with the subject of the discussion. Examples of the content level could be a discussion on the subject of software costs, or the determination of a due date for a deliverable, or the determination of the number of engineers needed for an outsourced project. Maintaining a focus on the content level of a discussion is fairly easy, assuming that the project manager is adapt at using the previously described communication skill of "tracking the discussion."

However, maintaining an awareness of the process level of communication is much more difficult, because this level of communication involves the subtle aspect of "how" the two team members are talking about the subject at hand. Examples of being able to maintain a process focus are:

- 1 Noticing that the other person appears angry and frequently interrupts when you are speaking to him.
- 2 Sensing that the other person has already made up his or her mind and is not really listening to what you have to say.
- 3 Feeling that the team member has some other personal agenda that is not openly being brought up in the discussion.

The project manager must use caution when considering the process level of the discussion, because assumptions are involved when one considers process variables (such as making the assumption that the other person is angry or making the assumption that the other person has an agenda that they are not speaking about).

It is best to not present these assumptions directly to the other person (such as saying *“Don, I know you are angry and that is why you are not wanting to speak with me.”*). Rather, the project manager will want to approach the process assumption (in this case, that Don is angry), in a more indirect manner. This could involve using an open-ended question such as *“Don, what else are you thinking about on this issue?”*

In summary, the project manager can increase the effectiveness of any communication by paying attention to both the content and process levels. When this attention to these two levels is added to one’s competency in the four interpersonal communication techniques, effectiveness in completing project tasks is increased, conflict is reduced, and project manager job satisfaction expands.

Importantly, project manager career opportunities and advancement are also increased when one has sophisticated people skills. The author provides executive coaching and leadership develop services to project managers. In this work, it is noted that most career problems are related to the lack of people skills; rarely does a project manager encounter a stalled career because of a lack of technical skills. Work in the field of career management suggests that as one advances to higher levels within any organization, increasing importance is placed upon people skills.

Developing People Skills

Regardless of how you rate your skills in the people skills described in this paper, you can develop additional competencies in these areas. Granted, the people side of enterprise project management comes easier to some than to others. But it is true than everyone can gain some level of competency in these areas.

Obvious approaches to gaining additional competencies in these skills include attending workshops, reading books, or seeking executive coaching. However, there are some less obvious and less time consuming approaches that can also be very helpful in acquiring these skills. Here are some of these less obvious approaches you can use to increase your current level of people skills.

Observe Those Around You

Look for individuals in your professional and personal life that you feel have good interpersonal communication skills. What do they do that you could try? This observation of successful people is an easy and very effective approach to adopting what works.

Practice the Skills in Low Significance Situations

One of the best ways to practice these interpersonal communication skills is to try them out in settings that have little significance associated with them. Such a setting could be when you order coffee or a meal. Try using an open-ended question with the waiter, and notice how you think you did and how they responded. Note both your successes in these settings as well as what you would do differently next time.

By practicing these communication skills in settings that are not significant, you will probably experience less anxiety and, in essence, will have “nothing to lose” in your practice.

Keep An Informal Journal

When you try a skill, write down your success and what you would do differently. An informal journal is a good method for recording your efforts while also giving you a chance to notice trends in your skill acquisition. The journal entries can be short and can be done sporadically.

Find An Informal Mentor

An informal mentor is someone that you might have lunch with periodically. During these lunches, you might directly or indirectly probe to find how this individual develops their people skills. These meetings keep you focused on skill acquisition, and can also serve as a source of personal support for your developmental goals.

Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

The people who have the best people skills seem to be those who have a sense of humor, don't take themselves too seriously, and are willing to try something different. These people are good at remembering that everyone struggles with people issues, and therefore they hold realistic expectations about themselves and others. There is no “right way” to develop and display people skills, and these individuals therefore put less pressure on themselves when they are trying out a new people skill.

Conclusion

Enterprise project management success, as well as individual career advancement, is increased when the project manager develops and then displays a variety of people skills, specifically the four interpersonal communication techniques discussed in this paper.

Everyone can improve in the area of people skills, and the improvement is best facilitated when the project manager practices the skills in various settings, look for role models in their professional and personal lives, and adopts a posture of not taking themselves too seriously in the world.

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