

Do u communic8?

Stacy Goff, ProjectExperts CEO

About This Article

First, about the title of this article: it reflects the ever-increasing range of communication options available in today's projects—especially when communicating with younger Project Team Members.

This article celebrates a new PM publication, *Hanbuch Fur Die Projektarbeit, Qualifizierung Und Zertifizierung* (*Handbook for the Project Work, Qualifications and Certification*). The 2700+ page four-volume set is a compendium of knowledge, experience, well-researched theory and competent practice of Program and Project Management. It supports GPM (IPMA-Germany) in their training, competence-based certifications, and advancement efforts in Project and Program Management. The publication is a practitioner's reference for each Element of the IPMA Competence Baseline (ICB). Its purpose: to help practitioners build the foundation for PM Competence, and organizational PM Performance.

The Communication chapter, written by Stacy Goff and Dr. Florian Dorrenberg, covers 59 pages. Thanks go to Florian for coordinating our joint writing, establishing German citations, and turning our efforts into a well-managed project. William Duncan (USA) also worked with Dr. Dorrenberg on the Scope & Deliverables chapter. In all, authors from four nations wrote chapters for this publication. Of special interest is the announcement that over the next several years the work will be translated into English and made available through IPMA. This article summarizes one topic from the Communication chapter, *Project Communication Planning and Execution*.

Introduction to Project Communications

Communication is the most universally applicable competence in the USA-NCB (the USA's National Competence Baseline is based on IPMA's ICB), because it touches or affects the usefulness of all the other PM competences. We often hear that Project Managers spend the majority of our time using our communication skills. Thus, no matter how great our technical skills or other Project Management competences, **communication effectiveness** has the greatest impact on our project success.

The other competences are also important, because they provide the information (or **content**) for effective communication. However, the practitioner's challenge is this: while a great amount of training and development focuses upon the other competences, few Project Managers ever receive formal training or coaching in ways to improve our communication. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the resolution of that situation, with the aim of improving PM Performance.

Project Communications Management Planning

Effective project communication begins with proper planning. To support project communication planning, we provide a [Sample Project Communications Plan \(click for download\)](#) for a large project. We suggest that you review the template (see the extract in Table 1 below), and *select* the items you need for medium or smaller projects, or *add items*, as needed, to adapt it for your organization. Below we explain the plan's structure and content.

This Project Communications Plan conveys *What, Why, Who, When and How* of all project communications. Beginning with those five Ws (often called the Journalist's Ws), project teams add the project-specific information needed for effective communication.

Those **five W** topics provide the structure for a useful *Project Communications Plan*. Note that the full downloadable Sample is complex—it is intended for larger projects. Subsets in this article are for example purposes.

Sample Project Communications Plan				
What (Content of Communication)	Why (Purpose; then Description)	Who (Responsible, then Audiences)	When (Timing or Periodicity)	How (Methods of Communication)
Initial Communications				
Initial Request Analysis	<i>I, E.</i> Determine Business Case	<i>Requestor, Leadership Team; Decision-Makers</i>	At Concept; then updated as it changes	Documented Discussion, Analysis, Formal Report
Justification; Business Case or Need for the Project	<i>E, G.</i> This is the foundation of approval and project continuation	<i>Requestor, Sponsor; Executives, Decision-Makers</i>	At Concept; updated with changed and/or approved status	Discussion; Analysis, Informal or Formal Report
Portfolio Prioritization	<i>D, E.</i> Evaluate Business Case, allocate resources, and use funds wisely	<i>Executives, Decision-Makers; Sponsor, Leadership Team, Interested Parties</i>	At Portfolio Analysis; may recur, given new, higher priorities	Meeting, Discussion, Analysis of Justification
Initiative Authorization	<i>G.</i> Approval to Proceed	<i>Executives, Decision-Makers; Sponsor, Leadership Team</i>	At Approval, or if approval is later rescinded	Meeting: Discussion, Decision
Kick-off or Start-up Meeting	<i>I, E.</i> Establish Charter, if used. Build a strong and committed team	<i>Sponsor; Leadership Team. Team Members</i>	Day one of initiative, or of each sub-component	Meeting; Discussion, teambuilding exercises

Table 1: One small portion of the Sample Project Communications Plan, by ProjectExperts; see the explanations for the *C, D, E, G, I* abbreviations in the Why section, below.

What: The Content of the Communications

The *content* or *information* of Project communications can be of two types, depending on the areas of interest or concern for the Interested Parties:

- **Product Information:** What the project will produce (scope), at what level of quality, and impacts or benefits for the parties (reflecting change management and benefits realization)
- **Process Information:** Information about the size, timing, costs, internal risks, reviews and other information about the status of the project, needed to manage it successfully.

The Sample Project Communications Plan concentrates on the Process Information, leaving the Product Information for application-area-specific documents. We categorize these process **Whats** according to three timing periods in the project, as explained in more detail below in the **When** section).

Why: The Purposes of Communication

Communication with no clear purpose (or merely because the standards require it), is wasteful. Project teams communicate for a variety of reasons, noted in the Sample Project Communications Plan with these abbreviations:

C = Collect: Collect information from others, while increasing their ownership stake in the project. Examples range from determining the requirements needed to achieve benefit realization, to discovering the true status of the project.

D = Decide: Persuade others to take action: to influence a manager to decide to resolve an issue.

E = Exchange: Dialogue, e.g., to arrive at mutually agreeable ways to respond to Issues or Risks.

G = Govern: Assure Project Governance; legal, regulatory, enterprise, or standard process requirements.

I = Inform: Inform others, and get their commitment, causing all interested parties or stakeholders to engage in the project, to want it to succeed, and to help assure that it meets their needs.

Communications that result in decisions and action most-often include information that makes clear the need to act, the timing for the needed action, and the benefit of acting or the consequences of failing to act. This usually requires use of project information, not just data. For example: *The current phase will be completed 15 December is data*. Actionable information for the same situation might include: *We could complete the current phase by 15 November by moving the core team to full-time for the next month; that would, however, require a change in their other project priorities*.

Who: Recording Communication Responsibilities, and Your Audiences

Project communication is not just the responsibility of the Project Manager. Every Stakeholder has communication responsibilities. For example, Team Members are the source for much of the information to communicate, so clearly Team Members have communication responsibilities. Project Sponsors have a responsibility to keep the Enterprise informed about the project, and to assure that all open issues are resolved in a timely manner. However, this communication will not occur if it is not clear who is responsible for it. When a Manager accepts the role of Sponsor, he or she must understand the responsibilities of the role, and the time it will require. Thus, each entry in a Communications Plan needs to list not only which role(s) are responsible, but also **which persons will accept that responsibility**.

Audiences for project communications can be narrow or very broad. Communication plan entries that list Stakeholders as part of the audience may require more communication effort than the total effort needed for all the rest of the project. For example, a new product that requires training an entire International Sales Force may require more effort to communicate with them, reduce their resistance and fear, and manage expectations, than is needed to develop the new product.

Stakeholders include all those persons or groups, internal or external to the permanent organizations, that are affected by a project's results, or all who can affect its success. Late discovery of additional Stakeholders is one of the greatest causes of late-project scope changes. Late stakeholder discovery also increases resistance to the organizational changes needed to implement the project results successfully. Identify and communicate with all those who are in the project's audience, to maintain their interest and support for the project, and to manage expectations that you will meet their needs. Indeed, the most-effective PM methods have early-project activities that identify these Stakeholders by role or name, establish communication with them, and help identify the unique information and methods of conveyance required by each Stakeholder.

When: Timing or Periodicity of the Information

Categorize Larger projects' communication types by their different timings:

- *Initial Communication* occurs from inspiration or concept until the team is formed and underway. This early communication is key because the majority of project problems result from gaps or omissions during this period. If the Project Manager was not appointed during this period, it is likely that little documentation exists about early decisions.
- *Recurring Communication* repeats throughout the project; a risk of this category is that some project communications are ad-hoc rather than scheduled or time-period driven. A result: it is easy for novices *and experts* to skip these ad-hoc communications.
- *Close-out Communication* also occurs at multiple timings. Those include each assignment completion, each Phase-end, and at Project-end—and beyond. Close-out communication is politically important—to maintain project support, for purposes of organizational change management, and in documenting and publicizing benefit realization.

Another “When” aspect is the proper response time for collecting and providing project information. Information provided too late for needed action to take place is a waste. For actionable communication to occur, collection and reporting of project information must have two timeframes:

- **Collect** project data and information on both an ongoing and an as-needed basis.
- **Report** the information either on a regular and predictable basis, or in cases where immediate action is required (such as the result of a Change Request or a new Issue) report on an as-needed basis.

Some Project Managers rely excessively upon “just too late” as-needed information collection, rather than adding ongoing collection. The Project Communications Plan should list the types of information to communicate and the timing for acting upon it. It should then identify the planned frequency of collection and reporting, or the triggers that will cause the team to collect and report the information.

Timing Affects Action Choices: Prevent, Intervene, Recover

Certain information types have different event timings. Consider the differences and similarities between a Risk/Threat, an Issue, a Failure, and a Lesson Learned. As presented at the 2005 IPMA World Congress in Delhi, India (Goff, 2005), *they are all the same information, with different timings and certainty*, as shown in Table 2 below. The information types also have different urgencies for action.

Information Type	Timing	Certainty of Impact
Risk/Threat	Has not occurred, action could prevent	Could impact
Issue	Has occurred, opportunity exists to intervene	Will impact
Failure	Has occurred, recovery is only option	Has impacted
Lesson Learned	May occur again in this project or later project	Likely to impact again

Table 2: Actionable Project Information is Project Intelligence, Stacy Goff; IPMA 2005 World Congress

In some organizations, the same “Lessons Learned” recur phase after phase, and project after project. Obviously, these lessons were not learned, but only recorded. This occurs for several reasons: Perhaps those who would act did not receive the information in time to do so. Perhaps there was not enough *consequence of in-action* to lead to decisions. Some people prefer to receive rewards for recovering projects gone awry, rather than preventing the occurrence. Others may be overwhelmed with too many opportunities to act, and they rationalize that they cannot act on them all.

How: Communication Distribution and Reporting

Some Stakeholders are readers and some are listeners, and others have preferences in the way they prefer to receive information. The effective project communicator seeking action must present the information in a way that makes it easiest for each Stakeholder to act. This may mean providing multiple forms of information: summary and details, verbal and written, and providing visuals (charts and graphs) and data (words or numbers). Consider also whether the delivery method should be formal or informal (based on whether a trail is needed). Clearly, communicators do not have the flexibility to produce custom information for every audience, but Project Managers who depend on the action of one or two decision-makers must target the communication preferences of the receiver.

Executing Project Communications

Performing project communications is more than just executing a plan. It is the differentiator between high-performing Project Teams and those who are not. It is also an ongoing responsibility of each member of the project team, to collect the information, to report it, and to respond, when needed. Whether the communication takes place in meetings, via email and reports, face-to-face one-on-one briefings, or just the ever-popular “managing by wandering around”, it can *appear* to be a burden.

What is more burdensome is when Project Managers fail to assure that needed communication is taking place, and as a result, the project suffers. In larger projects, the entire leadership team takes on this communication responsibility. In Programs, the Program Management Office may participate in assuring communication effectiveness. However, it is inevitably the Program or Project Manager's responsibility to assure that effective communication occurs.

Summary: Increasing Communications Effectiveness

Understanding and applying the insights of effective communication helps improve PM Performance. A Project Communications Plan does not guarantee effective communication—but it is the foundation for communication effectiveness. We rely on our ability to obtain actionable information from teams and project stakeholders. Only then can we convey that information with sufficient impact to compel others to act. Develop a Project Communications Plan, using the downloadable template. Customize it to your needs. Then execute it. Remember that the best communication is usually face-to-face, and where required (because of regulatory requirements or because of faint trust) with a paper trail. And remember too: an ounce of prevention is usually worth a ton of cure—among competent program or project communicators. *Do u communic8?*

About the Author

STACY A. GOFF, *the PM Performance Coach*, is CEO of ProjectExperts®, a Program and Project Management consulting, tools and training company. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he has been a contributing member of professional organizations such as IPMA® and PMI® since 1983.

He is a co-founder and 2009-2015 President of IPMA-USA, and 2011-2014 Vice President of Marketing & Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association. In September, 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow.

Goff's interest in project and program competence and performance began with establishing a PM Competency Center in a nuclear power plant in the early 1980s. It continued with engagements during the 1980s and 90s as he helped organizations assess and improve their project and program performance. Today, he continues his interest in individual, project team, organization, and now national and international PM performance.

Mr. Goff brings a results-oriented approach to Project Management coaching, consulting, and training. His insight for the needed PM Competences, and his delivery of effective training translate to improved project performance. In his working life, he combines his Project experience with sensitivity for the interpersonal skills areas—the human aspects of projects. The result: Measurably increased **PM Performance**. For more information about Goff, see: <http://projectexperts.com/about-us/principals-bio-stacy-goff/>.

Website link for the Sample Project Communication Plan:

<https://projectexperts.com/assets/SampleProjCommPlan.docx>

The ProjectExperts' workshop *ICE: Improving Communication Effectiveness*; was the foundation of the Communication Chapter, and source of the Sample Project Communications Plan. The Website link:

<http://projectexperts.com/pm-learning/project-professionals/increasing-communication-effectiveness/>

