

Communication: An Essential Skill for Project Managers

Ritika Pandey

As a Project Manager, if there is one skill that you need to master in your personal and professional life more than any other technical/ non-technical skill, it is the Art of Communication. Did you know that Project Managers spend up to 90% of their time communicating? This makes it critical for us to master this skill to deliver successful Projects. Lack of clear, concise, and regular communication will not only derail a Project but can also cause confusion, conflicts, and missed opportunities; and leave your stakeholders feeling dissatisfied. In this article, we will discuss some key pointers that we can keep in mind to make our communications more effective: -

Master different communication styles - A Project Manager must be proficient in different communication styles. Verbal communication, for e.g., can be face-to-face, on the phone, or on video calls. While communicating verbally, you must be mindful of your tone, clarity, and pace and seek real-time feedback from the listener (s). Written communications could include Emails, Teams/Slack messages, or Reports. Written communication must be clear and direct and have facts and figures, depending on the need.

Sometimes we communicate in multiple ways – for example, a Presentation (Written/Visual) given in person (Verbal). We also communicate via non-verbal cues using our body language and facial expressions. These can also give the speaker an idea of how the listener feels and vice-versa. You can leverage these cues to enhance your communication.

Communication is two-way - As the saying goes – "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." A Project Manager must be an active listener – only when you give your full attention to the person communicating can you understand, empathize, and gather even some non-verbal cues that could help you comprehend better. Be mindful in your communications, i.e., be present and be engaged. Let the speaker finish his/her sentences before you can ask questions; wait for your turn to speak and avoid distractions.

You should also ensure that ground rules are set for your Meetings to ensure everyone gets their turn. An open channel of communication also helps inculcate a feeling of Inclusion in the team, helping the team members feel valued and respected and more focused on the Project's success.

Leverage different channels of communication - Since more and more workplaces have adopted a more "Hybrid" form of working – there has been a greater emphasis on utilizing other communication channels. Video calls and Instant messaging are now used more than ever. As a Project Manager, you need to decide which medium is more appropriate for relaying the intended message. For e.g., to convey a critical decision, sending an Email makes more sense as compared to sending an IM. This also preserves a written record for future reference.

Similarly, for quick Yes/No questions, it is easier to send an instant message and get an immediate response versus sending an email. So before hitting "Send" on your next message, spend a moment,

and consider whether a phone call/meeting would be more appropriate! When it comes to meetings, sending an agenda in advance helps streamline communications. The use of proper visual aids during the meeting can also be helpful. Finally, ensure your audience is engaged and seek feedback during/after the session.

Tailor the message – Before sending any communication, ensure you're clear on who the audience should be and alter the message accordingly. For example, suppose you want to send a Project status update to the Leadership team. Generally speaking, this Report should be short; contain the big picture, the relevant facts/figures, and the immediate help needed. Now if the same Report is to be sent to the Project team, it could be longer, contain more details, and even be more informal. Tailoring your communications can help reduce unnecessary confusion and follow-ups. Use simple language and proofread your messages to add context and information as needed.

As we work with people from all over the world, it would also be helpful to avoid using unnecessary jargon or idiomatic language while communicating and keep the tone neutral and direct. E.g., Asking the team to “stack hands” may not make every team member understand your intent to agree on a decision as a team. Also, when managing conflicts – the messaging becomes very critical, and a constructive discussion is essential in finding a mutually acceptable solution to the problem.

Seek feedback - All said and done, each individual is different, and working with a Project team means dealing with a wide range of influences and cultures. As a Project Manager, you need to understand the importance of timely feedback from the recipients of your communications. When in doubt, ask. Ask for specific feedback on your regular communications content, frequency, timing, or other aspects. E.g., Some teams prefer your communications to be more detail-oriented. Constructive criticism is welcome and needs to be incorporated; after all, careful communication will make your Project Team work together like a well-oiled machine!

To conclude, mastering communication is a core skill for Project Managers and is critical in ensuring a Project's success. Effective communication can help build better relationships within the team, reduce unnecessary time going back and forth, and build an overall sense of unity. Any team collaboration starts with good communication within the team, and as a Project Manager, you are at the heart of it all!