The Unbearable Lightness Of Being… Simple

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Abstract: Most of us in project management and software leadership roles have to contend with the degree of detail and control we choose to use with our project team and stakeholders. Sometimes you can rely on the experience of the "audience" as a barometer of how much project management to impose in order to get a project completed on time (the D-U-N-N or "ship that pig" milestone). The range can be quite huge from minimal to an enormous amount of information. Often we attempt to strike a balance somewhere in the middle.

I maintain that there is another way to strike the right level of project management and it is affectionately called "Jus' E'Nuff" (The Jethro Bodine way of saying "Just Enough") project management.

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Some Background

Case Study 1 – Endless Meetings

Years ago, I lead an engineering team in a large software engineering organization that had a huge PMO organization monitoring and controlling key projects. There was such a commitment to project management, that a project manager was assigned to each product development team. There were frequent team meetings (at least once or twice a week) that became marathons of status checking and re-evaluation of resources for specific tasks. These meetings tended to take at least half a day. Multiply that time by the number of team players (15) equaled a huge investment. One thing I noticed was that nobody on the team looked forward to the meeting with one exception: the project manager! The team would have preferred an e-mail or a private conversation.

In addition, the development teams and infrastructure teams were geographically distributed with a PMO office that held weekly governance meetings composed of project managers, software development directors, and the executive staff. To enforce the role of a strong PMO, attendance was mandatory through conference calls and Webcasts. The concept provided a forum that would help the decision makers stay connected with project status (or so everyone thought). And there were lots of projects and these conference calls would include an endless number of PowerPoint slides and would also last for hours.

Project managers that were on the "hot seat" would hide the true status of a project surrounded by lots of text. Key words that you know the project is in trouble include the infamous "we're making progress" statement. It wasn't lying, it just wasn't being direct, honest, and to the point. (This is probably project status reviews start off with red, yellow, or green status – no words, just a simple color!)

Another thing I noticed was that nobody looked forward to these meetings with one exception: the director of the PMO. There was so much information to be conveyed that the communication tended to be one way from project managers trying to keep to their allocated time limits.

Case Study 2 – Too Much (or Hidden) Information

Another interesting situation took place several years later. A project manager leading a sophisticated enterprise database project, always looked frantic and tired. She spent countless hours gathering statistics on the health of her project including lines of code completed, defect counts, and costs. This information was used to create elaborate charts, spreadsheets, and PowerPoint slide shows detailing just about every conceivable way to present the “bad news” to the team and stakeholders. You see, she was a bona fide PMP! And even with all of this project management structure, it couldn’t keep the team on track.

We’d get into meetings and the team was anxious to learn how they were faring and after about two hours of presentation, I noticed a room full of blank stares. In fact, the information became so complicated that the team gave up trying to figure out what to do—they effectively deferred most decisions to her and “hung on for the ride.”

Case Study 3 – No Information At All

By far one of the most interesting situations that I faced was nothing like the other two case studies. A small software company needed leadership and structure, so I took on both the software development leadership and project management roles. Great talent, great products, and customers really liked dealing with the company. That sounds like a winning combination to me.

The problem was that software wasn’t getting delivered on time. The founder and CEO himself was one of the lead programmers and the one thing I didn’t expect was his stated policy that “meetings were a waste of time.” So, the opportunity for me to lead and unify the teams without the benefit of meetings (which I had always thought was one of the better vehicles for communication) had some major roadblocks.

How To Effectively Communicate

The 90% Rule of Thumb

None of those case studies may not resonate with you, but if they do, you’ll want to focus your energies on what is most important to communicate.

According to the *PMBOK® Guide*, to be an effective project manager you should expect that upwards of 90% of your time should be spent on some sort of communication (verbal, written, and so on). And if you are dealing with a culture (case study 3, for example) where *any* form of formal communication is not respected, how in the world will you succeed? Also, communicating information frequently will help reduce project risk by identifying issues early.

All three case studies do have unifying theme that I wholeheartedly believe in: ***simplicity***.

Tailoring the Message

Not all of the stakeholders want the same information. Period. This means you either communicate everything and let the stakeholders pick and choose what they want to know or you need to focus the communication to the class of stakeholder.

Tailoring the message may take considerable preparation, but I can assure you: it works! I'd recommend utilizing the Power/Interest stakeholder's quadrant model. Let's look at two stakeholders (see figure below).

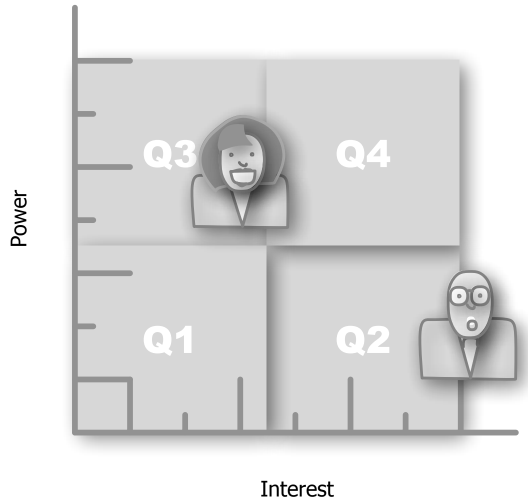

Figure 1 *Communicating differently based on Power/Interest Quadrant*

If Gina, an executive, has high power (influence) yet low interest in your project's detail (mapped in quadrant 3—Q3) you may want to not invite her to many meetings, but you'd tailor project status in the hopes that she (and her organization) could offer some assistance. Supplying detailed project status would not be a good thing for somebody in Q3.

If Pradeep has high interest in your project, yet low power to influence outcomes (thus, quadrant 2—Q2) you might want to communicate more detail than a stakeholder with low influential power and low interest (in Q1).

Where would you expect your project team to reside? Hopefully in Q4 since they should offer great power to impact the project outcome along with a high degree of interest.

Ultimately, you want any communication activity to be effective and useful to the recipients. One size doesn't fit all, so take that into consideration.

Use of Tabular Information

About 20 years ago I was told by my manager, "If you can, express any concept using a table. Tables are probably the best communication visual aid you'll ever need." I really *took* that to heart (well, he was my boss so I *had* to). With so many means to visualize project status, distilling information into a simple table simply works.

When you were a kid, what worked best? For multiplication, there were *multiplication tables*. For chemistry, there were *periodic tables*. To best describe *PMBOK® Guide* processes in a specific knowledge area, in my own book, *Principles of Software Development Leadership*, I used (you guessed it) a table:

Process Groups				
	Implementation			
Initiating	Planning	Execution	Monitoring & Controlling	Closing
	Develop Human Resource Plan	Acquire Project Team		
		Develop Project Team		
		Manage Project Team		

Figure 2 *Process table (Project Human Resource Management knowledge area)*

Forget bullets, forget charts, just use tables! For whatever reason, structured rows and columns with minimal text, numbers, or checkmarks are easily digested by the human brain. In fact, I frequently use a simple spreadsheet table that keeps track of Scrum project status (for both Sprint Planning and for Daily Scrums). Check the "Bibliography" to download the **Agile worksheet**.

An Example of Simplification

I talked earlier about getting to that balance and that is really at the heart of this article: how to simplify project communications so that stakeholders benefit from the information. Just because there are tried-and-true processes defined for project management, do you have to use it *all*?

The *PMBOK® Guide* is chock full of great tips, techniques, and methodologies all geared to help you be successful with your team. As much as I've read blogs from Agile evangelists ripping the bureaucracy inherent to PMI's greatest work of art (arguably, the *PMBOK® Guide*!), I have found tremendous value in its content.

Even if I only use a portion of it…

Let's take an example. There's an incredible assortment of inputs and outputs in the Project Cost Management knowledge area including cost management plan, activity cost estimates, basis of estimates, and project funding requirements.

However, when it comes down to it: the only document I've ever needed has been the cost management plan. This document (or PowerPoint or whatever you choose) establishes the overall planning necessary to monitor and control project costs. It has been a great tie-breaker when needing to refer back to cost and budget specifications that were agreed upon when the project was originally funded.

A Final Word

I suppose Mike Cohn says it best in his excellent *Agile Estimating and Planning* book:

> "We want communication […] to be frequent, honest, and two-way."

Most of us are consistently searching to revamp how we can simplify our project communication. I'd suggest these three techniques:

1. Tailor your message to the class of stakeholder so that they benefit and can take necessary action.
2. Don't use complicated visual aids when tables are all you may need.

3. Simplify communication to a consistent, minimal set of practical processes. (If it isn't referred to by your stakeholders it probably isn't needed.)

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Bio

Ken Whitaker of Leading Software Maniacs® (LSM) has more than twenty-five years of software development executive leadership and training experience in a variety of technology roles and industries. He has led commercial software teams at Software Publishing (remember Harvard Graphics?), Data General, embedded systems software companies, and enterprise software suppliers. Ken is an active PMI® member, Project Management Professional (PMP)® certified, and a Certified ScrumMaster (CSM). Sources for LSM’s material come from case studies, personal leadership experience, the PMI *Project Management Book of Knowledge* (*PMBOK® Guide*), and Ken’s leadership books: *Managing Software Maniacs*, *Principles of Software Development Leadership*, and *I’m Not God, I’m Just a Project Manager*. He’s also the creator of PM Chalkboard, www.pmchalkboard.com, the fastest way to learn basic project management principles with entertaining tutorial videos.

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