

The 5th Habit and Programme Communications

Many aspects of life rely on communication. School, parenting, relationships, sport, politics, social and business are just a few. The trouble is, when communication is performed poorly or not at all in any of these areas, people and results suffer.

Programme Management is no different and although we sometimes use advanced techniques to manage risk, apply the latest processes to operate more effectively, etc, communication is more about understanding people than anything else. The guidelines set out by the OGC and other organisations are certainly very useful references, but those guidelines can only become truly effective when they are applied by a Programme Manager who understands the human element of communication. Or put simply, a Programme Manager who understands people and the environment around them.

The Gower Book of Programme Management highlights the fact that a Programme is often in greater need for effective communication because it is often a one-off initiative which can face unique issues and challenges. It goes on to explain that a programme will not always enjoy the luxury of a regular set of commercial disciplines and management structures, which means effective communication is often more critical.

A Strategic Tool

Sometimes we focus on specific areas of managing a programme and as a result, items such as the Communications Plan drift into the background as other matters take precedence. The fact is, many people do not appreciate the real benefits of a Communications Plan.

The Programme Communications Plan should be seen as a strategic tool and a living breathing document, as opposed to a static document which has a few blanks to be filled in and is seen as a chore that needs to be done to get a tick in the box. When the plan is created with this frame of mind, often that Programme Manager will proceed to communicate on the fly, as opposed to according to plan. The result of communicating on the fly is often a hurried, mediocre or worse effort that will only serve to achieve mediocre or worse results. It's almost like a Project Manager creating a detailed schedule then ignoring it. Neither is a recipe for success.

The Communications Plan should be seen as a powerful tool to help us build relationships. With the influence that both internal and external stakeholders can have on our programmes, I see that as a very high priority and one which is often overlooked. If the programme hits a problem, ideally we want informed stakeholders with whom we have already built relationships, to support us when things get tough. We are far more likely to gain support from people with whom we have built understanding relationships

than from those who are strangers and know little or nothing about us, our programme or objectives. Furthermore, the better our relationships, the less likely we are to encounter problems.

At the most basic level, the failure to follow a good Communications Plan will often result in complaints such as; “I don’t understand”, “you didn’t tell me” and “where did this come from?”

Treat the Communications Plan as a dynamic tool that can be used to foster relationships and promote your programme. To do this it needs to be a living breathing high priority document which is both implemented and kept up to date.

The 5th Habit of Highly Effective People

In his best seller, ‘7 Habits of Highly Effective People’ Stephen Covey’s 5th Habit is about the principles of ‘empathic’ communication and he describes communication as the most important skill in life. He writes, “if I were to summarise in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: ‘seek first to understand, then to be understood’. This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication”.

Similarly, in his book ‘People Skills’, Robert Bolton writes, “communication skills alone are insufficient ...the person who has mastered the skills of communication but lacks genuineness, love and empathy will find his expertise irrelevant or even harmful”.

The point I’m getting to is that whether we are managing internal or external programme communications, the Communications Plan in the hands of a Programme Manager who neglects the art of emphatic communication can be likened to the baton (stick) in the hands of a tone-deaf conductor. Of course the Communications Plan alone gets you a tick in the box, but that’s missing the point isn’t it.

Not everyone is blessed with great people skills and those that seem gifted in this area have often acquired their skills from the environment in which they grew up as children and then on through adult life. Our environment certainly plays a big part in developing these skills as children and adults. But regardless of how well developed our people skills are, the more aware we are of our people skills, the more we can improve them. Robert Bolton’s ‘People Skills’ book and Neuro Linguistic Programming are just two examples of how we can enhance our people skills.

Whilst some might think that improving their people skills is a rather basic subject for professional managers or leaders, take a look at one of the most powerful leaders in the world. George Bush certainly has a long way to go to become a great communicator and although he reached the top of his business, he continues to be ridiculed by millions

because of his inability to communicate well. Regardless of who or where we are in life, there are few who would relish such ridicule and fundamental failing as a leader.

Development Dimensions International, Inc. published a report last year titled the “[Best Practices for Tomorrow’s Global Leaders](#)”. The study includes responses from 4,559 leaders and 944 HR representatives from 42 countries. To cut a long story short, the most common reason for leaders to fail in their roles, according to HR professionals was due to poor people skills.



Figure 1 - Percent of HR leaders selecting the reason for failure
Reference: Development Dimensions International, Inc. “[Best Practices for Tomorrow’s Global Leaders](#)”
http://www.ddiworld.com/pdf/ddi_leadershipforecast2005_globalreport.pdf

As with many of the 35% of leaders who actually fail in their role, not every Programme Manager will boast strong people skills. For anyone lacking in that department, one way to avoid the perils of people skill failure (at least where the Communications Plan is concerned) is to leverage the skills of an internal Communications Manager or those of a Project Manager who seems to excel in communications. For the obvious reasons, most would jump at the chance of contributing at programme level. At the same time, the Programme Manager in question should take steps to enhance their communication skills to avoid becoming one of the statistics shown above.

The Meaning of Communication is the Response that you get

It's all very well developing what seems to be a thorough Communications Plan, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating and the effectiveness of the Plan should be monitored and modified accordingly throughout the course of the programme.

What we communicate in our programmes will influence our audiences and how they react will influence us, or at least it should. Because if we are to see true two-way communication exist, we need to know how our audience is reacting so that we can react accordingly.

Encouraging feedback is always a good way of doing this because it's how the audience perceives the messages that really counts. Failure to monitor and assess feedback can easily result in ineffective effort which might even have a negative effect on the programme.

When encouraging feedback, we naturally set ourselves up for comment, some of which might be negative. The key here is to expect it, prepare for it and be both patient and receptive. This is our opportunity to address negative comments and ask "what can we do to be successful together?" It's the perfect opportunity to apply our people skills and convert stubborn stakeholders into supportive stakeholders – just like the good salesman who will relish the opportunity to convert a cold prospect into a buying client.

No matter what angle in life we look from, communication is about the two way exchange of information, not one way. Ignoring that basic principle is a cheap ticket to trouble – ask any successful CEO or marriage guidance councillor!

Communicating Inside-Out

The OGC recommends that that the Communications Plan should describe what will be communicated and the authority required, how it will be communicated, by when, by whom and to which audiences.

When managing a programme, whilst some associate the Communications Plan with external stakeholders only, it is equally important for internal purposes and we should tailor our efforts to both.

Introducing the Communications Plan early is always a good idea from an internal and external perspective. Not only can it act as an excellent PR vehicle highlighting early successes and raising positive awareness, but it can serve as a knowledge transfer tool and involve stakeholders sooner rather than later, facilitating greater commitment, understanding, motivation and momentum.

Internal Stakeholders

Personally, I have always seen the benefits of taking internal communications seriously, through the way in which people have quickly begun to feel appreciated, recognised, involved and informed. All this leads to a more motivated workforce which is critical for any Programme Manager. Motivational theory is a vast subject unto itself and has been studied closely by the likes of:

Abraham Maslow - Hierarchy of Needs;
Douglas McGregor - XY Theory 'Authoritarian/Participative Management Style';
Frederick Herzberg - Hygiene Theory;
William Ouchi - Theory Z - 'Japanese Management style');
Victor Vroom - Expectancy Theory of Motivation

One of the more popular theories is discussed in Chapter 10 of The Gower Book of Programme Management; Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs www.maslow.com. Maslow explains using a pyramid diagram, how our basic needs as humans are physiological, requiring things like food and water; this is shown at the bottom level of the pyramid. We then move up the pyramid to safety needs such as job and home security. Once satisfied, the next level up is the need to feel belonging, followed by the need for self-esteem. At the very top of the pyramid, self-actualisation, such as self-fulfilment, is shown as being our final need.

There are few of us who have escaped the feeling, at some point in life, of 'being kept in the dark, 'not appreciated', 'not recognised', etc. Some professionals can also lack self-esteem, even though it might not seem obvious. With this in mind, there should be no reason for any Programme Manager possessing an ounce of empathy to inflict such feelings on their staff. The Communications Plan can certainly help provide our teams with some of their needs and subsequently aid motivation.

Maslow delves deep into the theory of motivation as does McGregor and the others, and it's worth doing some high level reading to gain a better understanding of the subject. However, at the most basic level, it takes only a little empathy to appreciate peoples' needs so that we can act accordingly when managing people internally and facilitate motivation.

Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing model discusses team development and behaviour in detail. Again, this material is worth reading, at least at a high level.

There are many vehicles with which to address internal communication, but more importantly is what is carried on those vehicles and how it is delivered. A list of 20 possible vehicles is included in the next section of this article; 'External Stakeholders'.

Here are just a few examples of internal communication that can help motivate staff:

Individual successes praised;
Team spirit improved;
Job security emphasised;
Programme and project importance highlighted;
Tools and resources made available;
Successes celebrated;
Overcoming challenges celebrated;
...there are many more.

External Stakeholders

External stakeholders can make or break a programme and it is critical that the Communications Plan is sufficient enough to play its part in the game of Stakeholder Management. Whilst Stakeholder Management is beyond the scope of this article, it's worth noting that the collective benefit of this activity is the creation of relationships which consist of understanding, trust and cooperation. Once again we find ourselves very close to the words of a marriage guidance councillor because again we come back to the fundamental task of communication and people skills.

There is a whole fleet of vehicles that we can use to deliver our messages to stakeholders, and our choice depends on the message and where it's going. These vehicles can also be used for internal communication. Here is a list of 20:

Announcements
Blogs
Bulletins
Cascade briefings
CDs
Email
Exhibitions
Information Packs
Intranets
Meetings
Newsletters
One-to-One meetings
Podcasts
Press Releases
Programme Portal
Reports and Programme Documents
Seminars
The Media

Videos
Workshops
Etc.

Conducting a Winning Performance

I have purposely avoided describing how to create a Communications Plan in this article. What I hope I have done, is emphasise the fact that the Communications Plan has the potential to be a powerful tool, which in the hands of the Programme Manager with strong people skills, can help conduct a winning performance that the audience loves.

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