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Communicating with "Non-Experts": A Guide for Project Managers PDF PRINT EMAIL

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BY BILL ROBERTS

When you run a project you have two responsibilities: you must manage both your project and the organization's relationship to your project. This second job is often more difficult. You are a technical expert, accustomed to working with other technical experts. Now you must influence non-experts - executives, end-users and others -- who are in a position to help you or to hurt you. Welcome to the world of organizational politics.

Political problems trouble, delay, and sink projects more often than do technical problems. Resources are diverted, requests go unanswered, specifications mysteriously change, and business units either ignore you or try to run things. People expect the impossible and blame you for not delivering it. People don't listen and blame you for not telling them what was happening. You must accept that communicating, selling, and persuading are basic organizational survival skills. Your success depends on engaging the interest and support of very bright people who know little about your area of expertise. You must always remember that these "non-experts" will define your success or failure.

The label non-expert does not suggest stupidity or even lack of interest. Expertise is different than intelligence: it requires massive amounts of information and years of training in working with that information. You are probably appallingly ignorant of marketing or finance or accounting or manufacturing or customer service. We are all non-experts most of the time.

Experts and non-experts think differently. Despite this, we typically try to use the same communication strategies with both. We provide expert information - details and methods - to non-experts and think we have communicated. We have not. We have spoken but no one is hearing. Look at good popular science writers - like Matt Ridley or Timothy Ferris or Malcolm Gladwell. They focus on people, they give examples, and they tell stories. They understand non-experts.

Recent work in cognitive science has drawn a vivid picture of the non-expert. Outside our areas of expertise:

- we don't think abstractly - we think concretely, in pictures, in examples, in metaphors, and in stories;
- we don't think logically - we need help seeing how things connect and how one event is related to another; and
- the personal dimension of communication becomes more important - because we can't directly evaluate the evidence, trust in the messenger becomes crucial; we attend less to what experts say and more to how it is being said and who is saying it.

The less we know about any topic, the more powerfully simple images and stories shape our responses. You need to know the images people have of your project and the stories they are telling. Are they saying it's another self-indulgent engineering toy; another waste of the money the rest of us work so hard to make, another bleeding-edge effort? You only have one tool here - get out in the business and listen. Talk to people and ask direct questions. You need to know what people are already saying and hearing. If you are telling a manager how helpful your new scheduling process will be and her best friend from college is telling her how something like this screwed up routing for three months in her company, you are in trouble.

Outside our expertise, we have difficulty seeing connections and implications. I was recently at a managers' meeting in a major financial organization. During a discussion of the largest systems project in the organization - a new accounts-receivable system - the marketing people volunteered that they were supporting the project even though it had nothing to do with them. The systems people were aghast. The database capabilities of the new system, they asserted, meant that it would have more impact on marketing than on any other area of the business. Now the marketing people were aghast; no one had mentioned this to them before. The project's natural - and powerful - allies had been ignored.

This brings us to the most important point: communication with non-experts is always personal. It is not about "the project." It is about them and it is about you. These people know that they can't evaluate the technical side of your project. What they think they can evaluate is you. They can decide whether or not they trust you. We all make these kinds of evaluations regularly with physicians, auto mechanics, and stockbrokers. We can look at the certificates on their walls, but in the end, we make a personal judgment.



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Help people trust you. Your reputation in the organization is not built simply on the results you have obtained. Your reputation is based on people's perceptions that you are helping them get what they want. What they want first is to know that you understand their problems. If they believe that you do, they are inclined to trust you. You become "one of us" rather than "one of them."

Two questions that are at the heart of any strategic communication: what do they want from you and what do you want from them? Or, to put it more effectively, how can you best help them and how can they best help you? For this, you need to know your different audiences because their hopes and fears are your real topic. Since one of the universal realities of organizational life is that these concerns differ at different levels, let's distinguish your three key audiences: the leaders; the managers; and the users.

The leaders are your first audience. Depending on the scope of your project, this may be a department head and her direct reports or it could include the CEO, the top executive team, and even the board. So what do you want from the leaders? You want their sponsorship. The leaders have already signed off on your project or you wouldn't be in business, but you need their visible and sustained support, not just their nods or shrugs.

Leaders live in a world of massive demands on their time and resources. They are endlessly distracted and immersed in crises. So what do they want? They want to know that they made a smart decision in authorizing this project. They want results, they want to know that you are going to succeed, and they want to look effective. You only have their attention briefly, so you want to focus on what you are doing to succeed. You can help them by

- keeping your reports and presentations short and focused on results;
- being realistic and straightforward about difficulties; most leaders know that things go wrong, but they are offended at feeling deceived, misled, or uninformed
- providing materials for their own presentations and discussions with their bosses, board members, customers, financial analysts, and internal groups; leaders spend much of their time in these kinds of discussions and like having exciting, clear, and simple materials to use; it makes them look good; it also publicly commits them to you,

Never assume that because the leaders have approved your project that you are done. Remind them what they have bought and why they have bought it. Show them that they are getting what they decided to pay for.

Your next key audience--and one that is almost universally ignored--is the managers who will be affected. Never assume that because the leaders have said "yes" that you have the commitment or even the compliance of the managers. In fact, never assume that anybody has told them anything. The leaders always think they've communicated with their managers, but they probably haven't. This group is simply taken for granted, but this is a huge mistake. Managers have strong, implicit veto power. They can decide, for example, that their people are much too busy to be released for training. What you want is for them to become active agents for your project. These are the real implementers. You want them to be willing to make efforts for your success.

And what do these managers want? Managers often have the most to lose in organizational changes: they are under enormous performance pressures; they have succeeded with the old systems; and they live in a competitive world that gives them little margin for error or even experimentation. They almost certainly see you as a cost, not as an opportunity. You need to help them discover how your project is good for them personally. You build this support by:

- keeping in daily touch with the business;
- listening more than you talk, paying special attention to the managers' expectations and concerns;
- being realistic about costs, especially hidden costs around installation such as temporary reductions in efficiency, temporary opportunity costs, training costs, etc.;
- most importantly, helping them see how your project will help them specifically.

There is no substitute here for face-to-face direct communication. You must go to them. This is going to take time, but it is time well spent. Your effort gives you credibility. You want the managers to want your project; you don't want them either to misunderstand it or merely to tolerate it. The marketing group I mentioned should have hungered for the new accounts-receivables project. If managers want your project, it becomes an organizational priority, not another item to be moved down the list every time there is a crisis or another demand for resources. Your goal is for these key players to want you to succeed.

Your third audience is your user community, the people who will actually touch and use the results of your project. You don't have to sell these people, because they really don't have a choice. Besides, users are less cynical than their superiors. They may actually believe that you are going to help them do their jobs better. What you want is for them to become successful users, so don't sell to them - educate them. Your goal is to prepare them for installation. That is also what they want. They don't want to feel stupid and inept. So start educating them and start early.

You likely became a project manager because of your technical skills. One of the hard lessons is that you will fail without political skills. The technical skills with which you and your team create a first-class product are obviously essential, but they are not enough. Communication requires time and effort, but it is your job. You will win when you realize that effective communication is more about your audiences than about your project - about their hopes and fears. As you engage these hopes and fears, you may well discover that you are also becoming an expert in organizational communication.

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