

Communicating to keep projects on track through completion

10/31/05

It seems there is a problem with communication in my organization. Even when I think we are all on the same page, it seems like we end up going in opposite directions. What is needed to facilitate communication between all involved parties in any negotiation to meet agreed upon outcomes? Once we have agreed how do we keep on track?

There are a number of keys to effective communication. There are several that I like to focus on, and teach clients about. Be sure all parties have the same understanding at the outset. Verify that all parties are committed to delivering. Check for correct information along the way. Develop a tracking system to monitor progress. And think through rewards for successful completion.

Projects can be flawed from the outset if the participants have different understanding. Unfortunately, misunderstandings are common, even normal. Effective communication includes checking to be sure that the participants look at what has been requested the same way you do. One of the best ways to do that is to go over the details of the project, before starting out. Review what is expected, and how each participant will be involved. Ask each participant to describe what he or she will be doing. If anything is unclear or misunderstood correct it at the

beginning. Often we think we don't have time to go over the details at the outset. Unfortunately, if we don't we may have to make time later on to do it over. Remember the old adage, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Once all parties have the same understanding of what's expected, I like to ask if they are committed. Review what each individual has said he or she will be responsible for doing and delivering. Ask each person if he or she is making you a promise to deliver. Today, our communication has become very informal, littered with words like, "I'll try." or "I'll give it my best shot." Those words are a long distance away from words like, "I'll get it done, no matter what." "I promise to do this." and "You can count on me." Make sure your group understands the importance of coming through with their parts of the bargain. Asking people to make you a promise is a very effective way to get their attention and focus on the importance of delivering.

As the project unfolds, check that the information you receive is an accurate statement of where the project is. In today's world, we often lead with assessments of what is going on, which may or may not be backed up by facts. The problem with assessments is that they are open to interpretation. When you hear things like, "It's going fine."

"Things are on track." "No problem.", ask for clarification. Ask the participants to cite 3 facts about the status of the project. Look for concrete evidence. Teach your people to lead with facts, instead of assessments.

Often we get so casual in the way we communicate, we simply try to sum things up, or gloss over details, in order to get back to work. Unfortunately, that leaves other participants with less information than they may need to effectively participate. It may seem easy, even expedient, to say things are fine, even when an employee knows they aren't, because they know they can backtrack and fix them. However, saying things are fine when they aren't leaves other people with the mistaken impression that nothing more needs to be done. That can snowball into things like an expectation that the project is ready to move on to the next stage when it in fact isn't, or that they're available to work on something else, when they're actually needed to patch things up. Don't let miscommunication snowball. Make sure people are accurately filled in on the status, and check if more details are wanted, before making an overall statement about the status of the project.

One way to help with accurate communication is to develop a tracking system to monitor progress. Think about the stages of a project. How would you know

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that each stage was complete? What facts, milestones or outcomes would you look for, as evidence that the project was on track? How would you know the project wasn't on track? To insure that the project doesn't drift, list milestones and link them to completion dates. Put the milestones and completion dates on a wall chart, where people can see what's going on. Think of the United Way funding drive "thermometers" you've seen, showing everyone how far along the drive is towards its total funding goal. Try to make something like that. Helping keep the project visible, and reminding yourself and everyone else to regularly check on progress will help you to stay on track.

Of course, once the project is done, recognizing success is a valuable tool to encouraging future involvement. Rewards can run the gamut from saying, "Thank you", to recognizing contributions in front of the whole group. If the project warrants, think about bringing in a wedge sandwich on the last day of the project and "breaking bread" with all participants, as a way of reaching closure and acknowledging participation. The longer or tougher the project, the more you may want to think about rewards.

Announcing rewards at the outset of the project can be a great motivator. I remember one organization that told its people

that if they hit 2 x the annual sales goal, the entire company would take a week off and head for St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Throughout the year, when the goal seemed monstrous, people would remind each other of the opportunity linked to success. At the end of the year, the company did hit 2 x goal, made a ton of money and everyone had a well deserved break. Don't be afraid to ask for big commitments, and make big challenges. Do be ready to follow through.

Looking for a good book? Try Larry Bossidy's Execution, The Discipline of Getting Things Done. Here's a man who has made a career of communicating effectively, and delivering as promised.

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