

Communication can be a dangerous word – seemingly positive and action-orientated, but potentially laden with misunderstanding if used without thinking, writes **Donnie MacNicol**.

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

THE word is open to as many different interpretations as the number of people you ask, and the famous ‘good communication’ is particularly prone to misunderstanding. For some this may mean communicating an important point by adding a few lines to the next e-mail newsletter. For others this will mean identifying the message they want to get across, what change, if any, they are expecting from the recipient, the best way of conveying the information, ensuring they have understood the message and potential impact, gaining their feedback and then factoring this into future plans.

The latter option sounds a lot more effective, but what are the issues in all of us doing this all of the time? Below are things from my own experience, which can put a spanner in the works.

Project managers typically are not trained in communication, although it is often cited as one of the major causes of project failure and is critical to good performance. Communication should be considered as the lens through which all other aspects of the management of a project are viewed and therefore put right at the front of a project manager’s development.

Good communication takes considerable effort, especially when adopting the approach described above for the first time. Management of time is, therefore, critical – reflecting



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SAY WHAT? Donnie MacNicol says project managers sometimes have difficulty identifying the message they want to get across.

on the situation and potentially sacrificing the urgent for the important to ensure consistent and comprehensive communication.

Following on from this, project managers have difficulty in identifying the actual message they want to get across and, in particular, what change they may wish to see from the recipients. If the recipients are expected to change their behaviour in a lasting and habitual way, you must tackle their attitudes and values. Communication in this case has just turned into change management and should be dealt with accordingly.

In my experience, the best project managers do not live in the office, but are out with stakeholders talking to them about the project – building relationships, which will allow open and direct communication when the need arises to resolve issues. And if issues don’t arise on your project then I would suggest you are not ‘sweating your assets’ sufficiently!

Often people are comforted by a communication plan, but they are often no more than a mechanism for sending out copious amounts of lifeless data. The Plan should provide a process through which the project manager can be challenged and supported.

Web 2.0 can offer a solution, but this only appeals to a certain type of person. I rely on the collaborative nature of the web in a number of ways; being part of business, networking groups and leading a number of project management online communities. But many of my colleagues are not so comfortable. Most of us in our 30s, 40s and beyond have not grown up with it.

Politicians are often accused of communicating bad news or major change when it is least likely to be picked up. We as professionals with high levels of ethics would never consider such a thing.

- Donnie MacNicol, through his company Team Animation, works with clients to address challenges around communication, leadership and change – mentoring individuals, facilitating team events to deal with particular issues and consulting in organisations to improve the value from using project management. He chairs the APM People SIG and is a member of the APM Policy Unit. donnie@teamanimation.co.uk