
The Root Causes Of Poor Communication

by SUE DYER

Projects come in all types and sizes. There are information technology projects, strategic planning projects, budgeting projects, forecasting projects — almost any type of business activity will have a project associated with it. For the past 10 years I've asked project teams, "From your experience, what is it that makes one project succeed?" More than 95 percent of team members said that good communication was the reason for their success. When I asked the teams, "From your experience, what is it that makes a project fail?" more than 95 percent said that poor communication was the reason for their failures. Clearly communication appears to be the key to project success.

After asking these questions of 134 different project teams and then working with each team to improve their results, I began to realize that often what the team believes to be a "communication" issue is actually a symptom of the real problem — or root cause. When a team identifies their problem as one of poor communication and then works to try and resolve the "poor communication" issue, I found that significant improvement could not be made. Only by understanding the root cause can you effectively work to solve the underlying issue.

Over time, patterns began to emerge. I've identi-

fied several different root causes for team failure for which the project teams identified poor communication as their issue.

Let's look at each of these root causes in more detail to see if you can identify any that might be affecting your team, along with what you might do to overcome each.

Root Cause #1: Fear

Fear makes team members feel the need to protect their own interests. When we feel the need to protect, we certainly are not going to be open, therefore communication is going to be stifled. Worse yet, our communication is likely to be an argument about why we are right and others are wrong. We feel the need to state our position and feel unable to solve even simple problems.

Tip: Trust and fear can not coexist.

To overcome fear you must work to develop trust among the team members. Trust develops when you do what you say you are going to do — and by doing your part to help the team succeed. Teams are interdependent. No one succeeds unless everyone pulls together. Trust erodes when someone feels that they are being treated "unfairly." So always talk about what is fair; put fairness on the table whenever you see fear erupting on your project. Then, work to find a way to resolve issues that is fair to everyone involved.

Root Cause #2: Mis-Aligned Expectations

When the team members each have a different expectation on how things are supposed to work, you have mis-aligned expectations. Most often it is over

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roles, responsibilities and authority. With mis-aligned expectations, no matter how hard each side tries, they just can't seem to get together. The team may be "communicating" but understanding is not happening.

Tip: Draw a picture.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then why not draw a picture of how your team is organized? Who is doing what? How do people fit into the process? What is their role? Who has the authority to make which decisions? What is the decision-making process? By drawing a picture and allowing team members to ask questions, you will begin to align expectations by agreeing on how things are supposed to (or need to) work. Doing this exercise should make it very clear where you have mis-aligned expectations, or misunderstanding, on roles, responsibilities and authority. Then, you can work to come to agreement.

Root Cause #3: Confusion

Where there is confusion, chaos will break out. Again, this can be over roles and responsibilities, or over processes. When people aren't sure what they are supposed to do, not only does the team lose productivity, there is chaos as people move around trying to figure out how things are supposed to work. This is true at all levels of the project. If a decision is made but no one understands how it is supposed to be implemented, then you will end up with different people implementing different solutions — leading to chaos and what appears to be poor communication.

Tip: Work to become a trusted leader.

For a team to succeed, someone must be the leader. I see many teams without a clear leader, and the teams seem to lack direction and clarity. People vie for power and position, and that never leads to success. Instead work to become a trusted leader. A leader by definition is someone who has followers. And following is 100 percent voluntary. A trusted leader is someone whom people follow because they trust them to lead the team to success. When people trust the leader, then they feel they have a choice to be a part of the team. And the leader can offer clear direction, problem-solving and decision-making when needed.

Root Cause #4: Loss of Momentum

When everyone on the team is not in the boat, facing the same direction and rowing toward project success, the project loses momentum. The more frus-

tration there is, the more loss of momentum you will have. Frustration is caused when the team goes forward but keeps getting pulled back. Soon the project is behind schedule and communication switches to finger-pointing, causing even more loss of momentum.

Tip: Resolve issues quickly.

Teams start out and gain momentum over time. When problems and issues arise, it causes a loss of momentum. However, if the problem or issue is resolved quickly, the momentum is only slightly diminished, and the team continues to move forward and grow. It is therefore imperative that you have a clear process for resolving issues quickly. This process needs to be known by all and used. One such process is to agree to disagree on an issue and then empower a new set of people to look at the issue so they can offer their ideas for resolution. Give these new people the power to decide. Then move on. Indecision is your enemy.

Root Cause #5: Dissatisfaction

Research shows that when project teams look forward to going to their jobs (the level of job satisfaction is high), the project is highly likely to be on time and on budget. When the project teams "dread" going to work, the project is in deep trouble. When a project is not fun to be on and a sense of dread appears, communication between project team members will be strained at best.

Tip: Build in fun.

Teams that have "fun" perform better. And you can build in the fun. It is important to take time to laugh and enjoy each other. I have seen teams that play golf, have barbecues, share a joke at the start of each meeting, and learn to fish together. These were top-performing teams. So monitor the level of "fun" on your team and work to ensure that your team is having fun together.

Root Cause #6: Lack of Commitment

When people aren't really committed to the success of your project, you have "slack." This is like slack in a rope. You don't have a strong team focused

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on what it will take to succeed. Inadequate resources can also cause “slack.” The project team loses faith that they can achieve the project goals. Lack of communication is usually the result.

Tip: Manage the level of stress.

Some people are just along for the ride and are not really committed to the success of your project. This causes enormous stress on the other team members. Sometimes you can't do much to get rid of the lack of commitment, but you can monitor and manage the level of stress that the team encounters. Teams come together to accomplish something. So you need to plan celebrations along the way (perhaps at each milestone) of accomplishment.

Root Cause #7: Unconscious Incompetence

Inexperienced staff can face a very steep learning curve. Even one inexperienced person in a key role can cause havoc on your project. They just don't know what they don't know, so they focus on what is available to them: the specifications, contract and drawings. They must learn how to resolve specific project problems as they occur. Often documentation becomes the focus instead of problem solving.

Tip: Be open to mentoring.

Both the experienced and inexperienced team members must be open to the possibility of sharing knowledge. Having a mentor can shorten the learn-

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ing curve for new hires by decades. Too often new people are sent to do the grunt work or sent into the project like lambs to the slaughter. These are not very effective ways to deal with people who need to learn. For those of you who are new, you must accept that others who have been around for some time have seen a few more things than you have. You don't need to know everything. Your job is to learn.

By knowing the root cause of your communication problems, you can vastly improve your chance for your team to succeed. One of the best ways to uncover communication problems and their root cause is by conducting a monthly measurement on how well the team is communicating and working together. □



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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