Effective Workgroup Communication

*An Investment for
Successful Projects*

White Paper

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Introduction

▮▮▮▮▮ we understand that one of the fundamental struggles facing IT organizations in the midst of major change is the lack of effective communication. Although many people understand that communication is important, it is difficult to understand the power and scope of communication within workgroups and organizations. The importance of communication is realized at the end of an unsuccessful project, when poor communication is typically a scapegoat for project failure. Many who have participated in a failed project will cite a lack of communication or "miscommunication" as reasons why a project did not reach its full potential.

> *Millions of dollars lost on poorly run meetings…*
>
> *Project failure…*
>
> *Lack of vision…*
>
> *The key to avoiding these pitfalls is understanding the power and scope of communication and building a strategy that transcends the life span of the project.*

At the end of the day, the bottom line is the bottom line when it comes to major change initiatives. Time and effort spent on communication must be seen as an investment for project success, and therefore as an investment in reaching the bottom line goals of the project. The cost of not properly addressing communication can severely affect the bottom line. Things as minimal as bad meetings and expectation miscues, or as major as the lack of a strong and compelling vision, can result in cost overruns. It has been reported that scores of Fortune 500 companies estimate they have lost millions of dollars on poorly run meetings (Arnold, Cragan & Wright 1996). In more severe cases poor communication can result in project failure. Obviously, project failure is much more costly, frustrating, and more public than bad meetings. Additionally, project failure can be quite embarrassing in the eyes of your peers, your customers and other key stakeholders in your corporation.

By understanding the power and scope of communication, you can build a communication strategy that transcends the life span of a project. It is imperative to plan, build and execute a communication campaign to support major IT change initiatives. From the beginning of a project, prior to the official kick-off, to leaving clients with a post-implementation communication strategy that provides a strong foundation for continued success, ▮▮▮▮ guides our clients through a sea that is often cluttered with IT project failure and frustration.

This paper discusses, at a high-level, the way ▮▮▮▮ thinks about communication as it affects our clients by looking at the following topics:
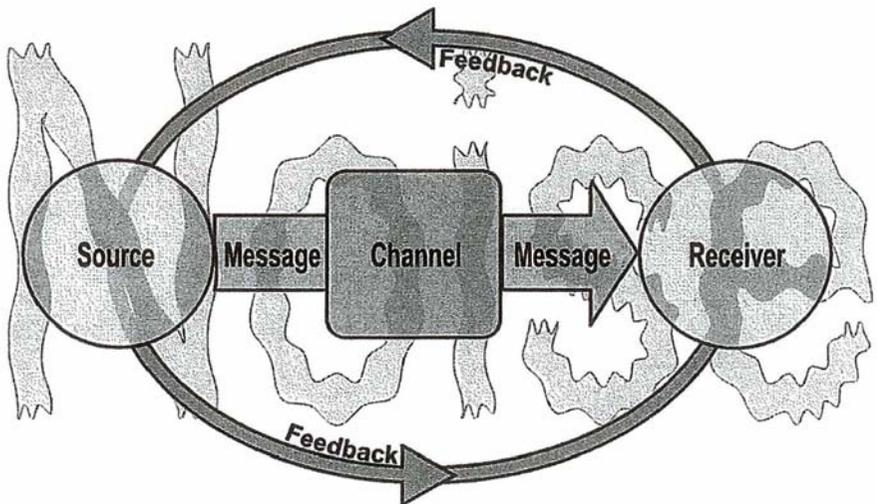
- what communication is,
- why we communicate,
- what the communicative forces are behind human action and interaction within groups and organizations,
- when communication efforts fail to support change initiatives, and
- how to design effective communication campaigns.

Communication is...

Communication is the process through which we share information and create meaning. Meaning does not reside solely in the sender, the receiver, or even the message. Inherent in our communication methodology is the belief that **meaning is negotiated**. Through various communication interactions, meaning is produced or co-created by the participants of those interactions.

A very useful model for understanding the communication process comes from the work of renowned information specialist, Claude Shannon. This model (see figure 1) demonstrates how a sender sends information through a channel to a receiver, while "noise" is continually affecting the integrity of the information. The reactions of a receiver serve as feedback to the sender. At this point, the process can be seen as repeating itself with the roles of sender and receiver being reversed as the feedback loop provides information that transforms the sender into a receiver.

Figure 1: Model of Communication

Based upon Claude Shannon's Model of Information Systems
from Cragan & Shields (1998)

As represented in the illustration above, a good way to think about communication is to think of it as an information system. Two key components, as defined by Shannon, are noise and information.

Noise is the friction that affects message transmission. Noise is always present in a communication episode. Because of noise, error-free communication and information sharing is impossible.

Information is data, knowledge, or opinion that reduces the uncertainty of at least one participant in a communication episode by providing something they did not already know.

Before moving on, it is worth noting that the amount of information in a message is proportional to the amount of uncertainty in a communication event. Information reduces uncertainty! Therefore, if someone tells you something that you already know, you have not received any new information.

We communicate to...

Fundamentally, we use communication on projects to help create order and structure around systems that tend towards chaos. The fact that systems tend towards chaos (Cragan & Shields, 1998) is not a new concept, nor is it limited to human systems. The nature of all systems is to wear out, break down or fall apart. From physics, we know of the phenomena of entropy as referring to systems in nature that tend towards death or chaos. Our solar system is an example of a system that tends towards chaos and eventually, entropy and death. When the sun burns out there will be a great deal of chaos and entropy. Neg-entropy is anything that works against entropy inherent in a system (i.e., the sun). Therefore, we can view the optimal exchange of information through communication as neg-entropy providing structure around chaotic systems.

From the work of Charles Berger (1989, 1991) and others, we know that humans have an inherent need to share information. Information sharing creates, stabilizes and sometimes, if taken too far, destroys relationships. As humans participating in organizations, we seek an optimal level of information to understand our environment and function well in organizations (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Model of Information Overload
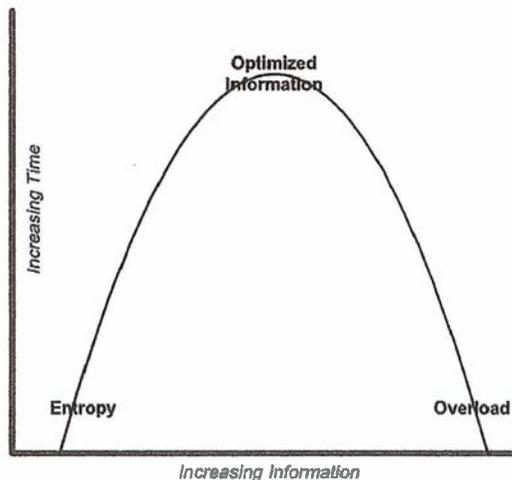
From Cragan & Shields (1998)

An optimal level of information is simply a balance that lies somewhere between entropy and overload. Both entropy and information overload work against the goals of negotiating meaning with participants in a communication episode. While entropy occurs when not enough new information is introduced into an information system (communication), overload occurs when too many new pieces of information are introduced into a system. Simply stated, optimized information sharing is realized when we balance redundant and novel messages. Redundancy is repeating what is known, and is used to counteract the effects of noise, which are ever present. Redundancy establishes a known foundation for those receiving information. However, if there are no new, unique or fresh messages, entropy sets in. That is why we need novel messages – messages that are fresh, new or unique. We need to introduce new things into our systems to keep the system alive. Yet, if there are too many new messages there will be information overload. On a personal level, think about when you are bored with a presentation or a speech. When that occurs, you are experiencing too many redundant messages. On the other hand, when you don't understand something, or it is "over your head," you are suffering from information overload.

By understanding what communication is and why we communicate on projects we can begin to explain, and in many cases predict, what various audience segments need from a communication perspective. We work to create order and structure around major change initiatives through the effective use of communication that is grounded for the audience.

In short, communication should be used to reduce uncertainty around events, as well as to create order and structure around projects. Reduce the effects of noise by having enough redundant messages, yet maintain enough novelty to reduce entropy.

Communication Dynamics

Beyond the elemental dynamics at work in all communication, individuals working on project communication need to understand communication principles specific to workgroups and organizations.

Group Communication

Because so much of the work completed in organizations today is done by workgroups, it is important to understand the dynamics of group communication. From a communication perspective, there are four major reasons why we utilize work groups (Cragan and Wright 1995):

1. Productivity
2. Quality
3. Consensus
4. Membership Satisfaction

Productivity and quality are concepts that we are all familiar with and it is understandable why corporations would want work teams to be more productive while increasing the quality of their outputs. However, consensus and membership satisfaction might not be so obvious, but when workgroups are established these concepts become more apparent. A corporation is going to feel more comfortable about strategic decisions and other outputs from workgroups, if those group members agree on the decisions (consensus) and if the team members are satisfied with their output.

A key driver to healthy, productive groups is an understanding of member roles and responsibilities. Sometimes the key roles occur naturally and other times those roles need to be cultivated to ensure the health of the workgroup. Beyond an understanding of roles, team members must trust each other, have pride in what they are doing, and have a problem-solving structure that can quickly and effectively move them through periods of conflict, which are necessary to make tough decisions. However, structures that work well for some groups may not be the best for other groups.

Group communication is really based on finding the right balance or recipe for success. The proper balance is more likely to happen through a solid understanding of the guiding principles for effective group communication. These principles are inherent in the Synet Communication Methodology.

Organizational Communication

In addition to group communication, it is important to understand the dynamics at work in organizational communication. Most of us are familiar with how we are supposed to communicate in organizations, based on the managerial structure and the cultural norms of the corporation. However, what is less obvious is how communication organizes.

Karl Weick's work (1979) on the psychology of organizations illustrates how people use communication to organize. People in organizations use communication to organize and to reduce the uncertainty faced in getting a complex job done. Not only do people discuss getting the job done, but they also communicate to determine the best way to get the job done. This organizing aspect of communication is basically organizational Darwinism – survival of the fittest. We strive to share the best kind of information that will get the work done and separate us from the competition. We talk about, or share information about, how we can do the job better. Typically, we don't talk about that which we are confident we know – we talk about what we are unsure of. Few of us talk about the best way to pick up a phone or to use a stapler. However, senior-level managers may never stop talking about the best way to chart corporate strategy. So, it is through our communication actions and interactions that we produce meaning and consequently continue to rebuild organizational structures within corporations.

The guiding principals used to arrive at consensus and achieve member satisfaction include:

- *Understand members' roles*

- *Trust among members*

- *Pride in what they're doing*

  Effective problem solving structure

Networks are another example of the communication dynamics at work in organizations. The key to networks is knowing who the opinion leaders and gatekeepers are in an organization. Many times this cannot be derived from organizational charts. When implementing major change initiatives, it is very important to have the alignment and buy-in from the opinion leaders and the gatekeepers, because how they interact with members of an organization often affects the outcomes of reengineering projects.

One of the best ways to engage the opinion leaders, gatekeepers and others in an organization is to develop a compelling vision that is grounded in their reality. When the right people are engaged and carrying the vision forward, an entire division or corporation can get swept up in the power of that vision.

When communication efforts fail to support major initiatives...

Communication efforts fail to support major initiatives when they:

- are not clear enough
- are not timely enough
- are not compelling – they don't move people to do things
- lack enough audience focus – the messages are not "grounded"

Clarity

Due to the presence of noise, communication through the presentation of information must be clear, concise and straightforward. In politics, there is "double speak," the art of not communicating. However, on major projects in organizations it is important to be as clear as possible with all communication.

Timeliness

The key messages that are communicated on a project must be timely. Timeliness not only refers to messages being delivered on time, but also making sure there is reinforcement (redundancy). This reinforcement needs to happen both from a time perspective – it needs to happen more than just once—and through the use of multiple channels. John Kotter (1996) and other business scholars have cited that one of the major reasons why change efforts fail is due to under communication. From a time perspective, this means messages must be reinforced by repeated delivery.

Compelling

It is very important to have engaging and compelling messages. The key messages around change initiatives need to catch people. Motive and emotion for action reside within the message. Communication builds a symbolic reality that, if executed correctly, makes people want to participate, help and ensure the success of a project.

Having a simple, yet compelling message helps people on a project team carry out the message to others in the organization. If you can't state your project's vision in a way that engages people, and do it in under five minutes, then you better go back to the drawing board. The key messages of a communication campaign need to be compelling and simple.

Audience Focus

When working on communicating effectively, it is very important to understand your audience. Negotiating meaning is much easier when you know your audience. The "WIFM" principle (what's in it for me) needs to be considered in structuring communication for various audience segments. Know how and what you are communicating as it relates to your audience.

In addition to structuring communication that should be meaningful for your audience, it is important to know how people assess communication. Fundamentally, people view communication as stories and assess communication based on two things – probability (could it happen?) and fidelity (is it true to experience?) (Fisher 1987). Therefore, communication must be grounded for your audience members. Communication is grounded for audience members when it "rings true" to their experiences and understanding.

Communication as a campaign...

At Synet, we view project communication as part of a campaign that is designed to support the overall objectives and goals of the IT change initiatives of our clients. By viewing our communication methodology as a campaign, we mean that we work on developing a compelling vision and clear goals with solid supporting messages. Those messages are delivered in a strategic manner that addresses various audience segments in an organization (i.e., interpersonal, group and the organization as a whole). Like a campaign that supports a candidate, ours has the flexibility to account for differences in audience types throughout the organization, while driving home clear, engaging messages.

Our communication methodology represents how we think about communication. The principles of good communication, whether it be a general understanding of communication or the understanding of specific arenas, such as groups or organizations, serve as the foundations for our methodology. This understanding and practical application are factors that contribute to successful projects.

About the Author

Mr. Arnold has over four years experience in the areas of marketing and communication consulting and holds a M.S. in Communication. He is well-versed in small group communication, teambuilding, organizational development and total quality management. He has facilitated numerous group decision making meetings, including more than 40 computer-assisted decision making sessions in a Group Decision Support System (GDSS) environment. Additionally, he has analyzed qualitative and quantitative data to segment and profile various markets for marketing and communication campaigns. Previous publications include an article about GDSS and a group communication instructor's manual. His expertise and strong professional skills make him an instrumental component of the ▮▮▮ organization.

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