

Communicating Upwards for Effect



Effective communication between project stakeholders is always difficult and misunderstanding and confusion are easily created. The key to effective communication is clarity created through simplicity. To paraphrase Albert Einstein “*If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough*”. This is particularly true when trying to communicate project objectives to senior executives¹.

The communication problem is compounded by project management jargon; technical industry jargon and language differences. Within the ‘project community’ we have a range of terms that have a specific meaning, Critical activity, time now, EV, etc... people in the general business community frequently use the same words in similar context but apply completely different

meanings. We say something; they attribute their different meaning and know they have understood exactly what we've said – but their understanding is not what we meant!

William H. Whyte also summarized the problem nicely: “*The major problem in communication is the illusion that it has occurred*”. Without an accurate understanding it is impossible to agree, disagree or resolve anything.

Lewis Carroll considered communication in *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1872): “*When I use a word*”, Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “*it means just what I choose it to mean - nothing more and nothing less*”. Interestingly, Humpty Dumpty's view of communication is similar to that of most people.

The trouble is if you want to communicate with a purpose, the listener needs to understand what you have chosen the word to mean and this is not helped by the English language! A few examples to confuse anyone:

- The bandage was *wound* around the *wound*.
- The farm was used to *produce produce*.
- The dump was so full that it had to *refuse* more *refuse*.
- We must *polish* the *Polish* furniture.
- I did not *object* to the *object*.
- The insurance was *invalid* for the *invalid*.
- They were too *close* to the door to *close* it.
- The *wind* was too strong to *wind* in the sail.
- After a *number* of injections my jaw got *number*.

¹ **Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders.** Building, and managing, relationships with senior (upwards) stakeholders is essential for success. This book contributes to an understanding of the critical survival skill of engaging senior managers, and of ‘helping them help you’. See more at: <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/shop-advising-upwards.php>



No wonder the English language is hard to learn!

Whilst any language is superficially made up of words and words have meaning, context is critical. An example is '*Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present*'. This sentence could be rewritten '*Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to bestow the gift*'. What's really interesting though is most people with a good command of English within the context of the whole sentence would have little difficulty in distinguishing between:

- present = the current time
- present = bestow or give
- present = gift.

But it's not that simple! Context depends on a whole range of factors including professional background. Ask an Architect for the plans for a project and expect to see a bundle of drawings. Ask the same question of a PMP qualified project manager and expect to see a bundle of documents including the schedule, budget and scope. Same word different meaning based on the context the listener is working within. Your boss' context is almost certainly not yours and you need time and a two-way dialogue to ensure correct understanding.

No understanding means no communication, or worse, miscommunication!

This is critically important because one of the keys to project success is managing stakeholder expectations; and the only medium we have to influence expectations is effective communication. But when communicating with senior stakeholders, their expectations will be based on what they understood we said, which as we have already demonstrated, may not be what we meant²!

This is a major risk, particularly if the misunderstanding by senior stakeholders leads to unrealistic expectations that are unlikely to be fulfilled! Great care needs to be taken to avoid providing information in a form that creates impossible or inaccurate expectations.

For example, as project management professionals, we all know that our carefully prepared estimates of future cost and time outcomes are approximately correct, and the inevitable small estimating errors will lead to a range of probable outcomes, but we cannot assume our bosses have the same understanding. Despite knowing this, far too many project managers seem willing to create schedules that state explicitly that a task will complete at 3:30pm on a Tuesday afternoon in 4-months' time or the total cost of their project will be \$10,988,547.55. These pseudo accurate estimates based on detailed calculations made by sophisticated software are no more valid than estimates presented in more general terms but the pseudo accuracy can easily create false expectations.

The figure of \$10,988, 547.55 is no more valid than an estimate stated in more realistic terms such as; \$11million with a probable range of -5% to +10%. Achieving a detailed estimate for an \$11 million project to within a range of -5% to +10% indicates a very careful estimating process in a stable, well understood environment; you know you have done a good job, but does your boss??

The difference is the precisely wrong number calculated to the nearest cent will raise the expectations of a range of senior stakeholders as to degree of accuracy that can be achieved in an estimate, leading to 'perceived failure' when the stakeholder's unrealistic expectations are not realised. If your estimate is \$10,988, 547.55, it only takes a cost increase of \$2000 (an estimating error of 0.02%) for your project to 'fail' because the costs have 'blown out' from \$10+ million to over \$11 million.

² For more on the difficulty of understanding project documentation see *Understanding Design - The challenge of informed consent*: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF_Papers/P186-Understanding_Design.pdf



Effectively communicating upwards requires the project team to look at the data generated by their spreadsheets and scheduling tools and then apply common sense to the way the information is formatted before forwarding it to senior stakeholders.

For effective communication, unnecessary detail, pseudo accuracy, jargon and ambiguous words should be removed and replaced with useful information framed in simple, accurate and realistic terms. There is a significant difference between simplistic and elegant simplicity³; skilled communicators aim for easily understandable elegance.

From this base communication theory requires feedback and testing for understanding; wherever possible closing the feedback loop is the key to effective communication but this is not always possible. Recognising breakdowns in understanding in face to face conversation is fairly easy; but a confused look cannot be seen through the medium of an email or when your boss is reading your report on her way home. It is only by thinking carefully about how you structure the information contained in your communications, that you can increase the likelihood of creating clear understanding and reasonable expectations.

If this all seems like hard work, remember that unrealistic expectations are unlikely to be fulfilled, and if the unrealistic expectations are held by your CEO and your project fails to live up to them, you are the person who gets fired!

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³ For more on the difference between simple and simplistic see:
<https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2014/08/15/mind-your-language/>