


Project Communication: Beyond Text and Email

Adrian Reed



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Introduction

When working on business change and process improvement projects, communication is absolutely crucial. So often, it'll be necessary to communicate and engage with a wide range of dispersed stakeholders across organizations, teams and locations.

Different stakeholder groups will have different needs, fears and aspirations – and some will be more interested in the change than others. Yet getting the balance of communication and engagement right is essential – if we inadvertently under-communicate, miss engagement opportunities or miss stakeholders then we may find that the change our organization has worked so hard to implement is rejected.

Our change project may be perfectly specified and delivered, but because the right people weren't involved and didn't have the opportunity to comment, we have missed the opportunity to consult, build buy in and validate assumptions.

In this ebook we explore practical tips that help to ensure our project communication is fully absorbed and actioned.

The Communication Challenge



I suspect many people will be reading this ebook at work, and underneath the article will be an email application.

I know that whilst writing this ebook, although I have closed down my email client to focus, I still have an unnerving feeling that emails are arriving and piling up ready for my attention.

In many organizations email has become a default 'communication' mechanism for most purposes. A 2009 Harvard Business Review article (Hemp 2009) reflected on figures from various research studies showing:

Knowledge workers spend an average of 20 hours a week managing email

60% of computer users check their emails in the bathroom

A typical knowledge worker turns to email 50 to 100 times a day

Employees consider 1 in 3 emails unnecessary

These are sobering statistics, yet I suspect many of us identify with them. Communication is often stated as a problem in organizations – yet rarely is there a lack of communication. Indeed, the volume and type of communication may be part of the problem.

So, if we are to communicate useful and relevant information about our project or process improvement to our stakeholders, in order to test ideas, validate and drive engagement, how do we stand out amongst the tens of thousands of other interruptions our busy colleagues are facing each week?

Taking a Step Back: What Do We Mean By “Communicate”?

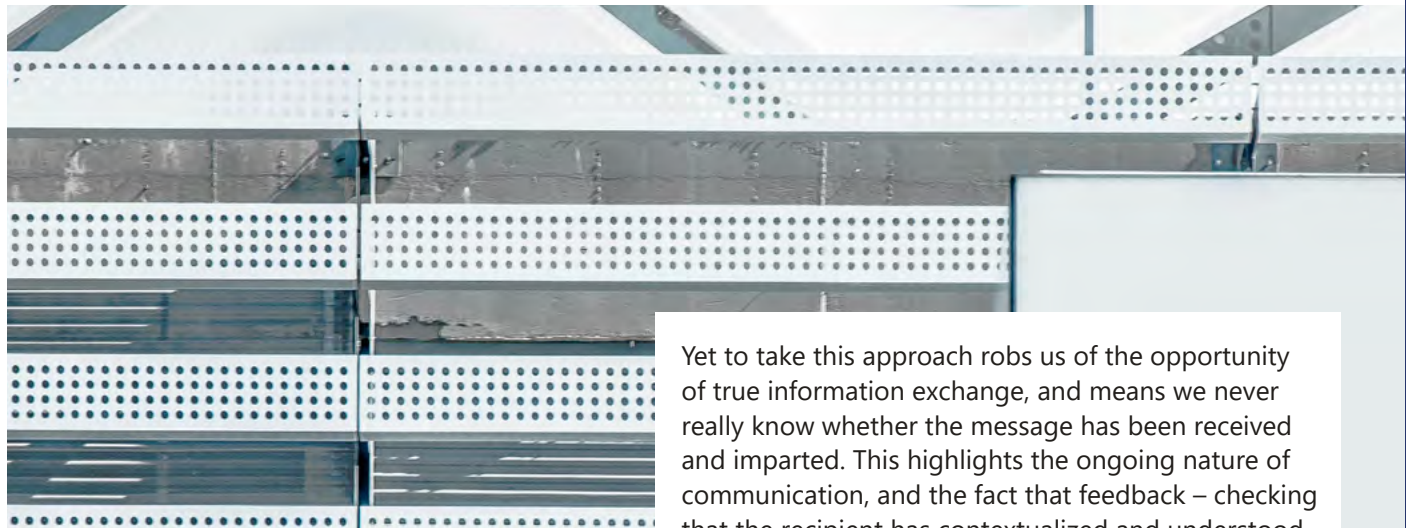


In our busy organizations, it often feels like the verb “to communicate” has become synonymous with “send a quick bulk email”.

It is worth taking a step back, reflecting, and thinking about what we actually mean by communication in a project and organizational context. A useful starting point can be to refer back to a formal definition.

Oxford Dictionaries Online defines communication as:

“The imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium...”



There are several useful pointers that can be derived from this definition for us as practitioners of change. Firstly, communication is really about the imparting or exchanging of information. In today's busy organizations it is tempting (and sometimes encouraged) to ‘fire and forget’ – to send an email or other form of communication and assume that its content has been read, digested and understood.

Yet to take this approach robs us of the opportunity of true information exchange, and means we never really know whether the message has been received and imparted. This highlights the ongoing nature of communication, and the fact that feedback – checking that the recipient has contextualized and understood the information – is crucial.

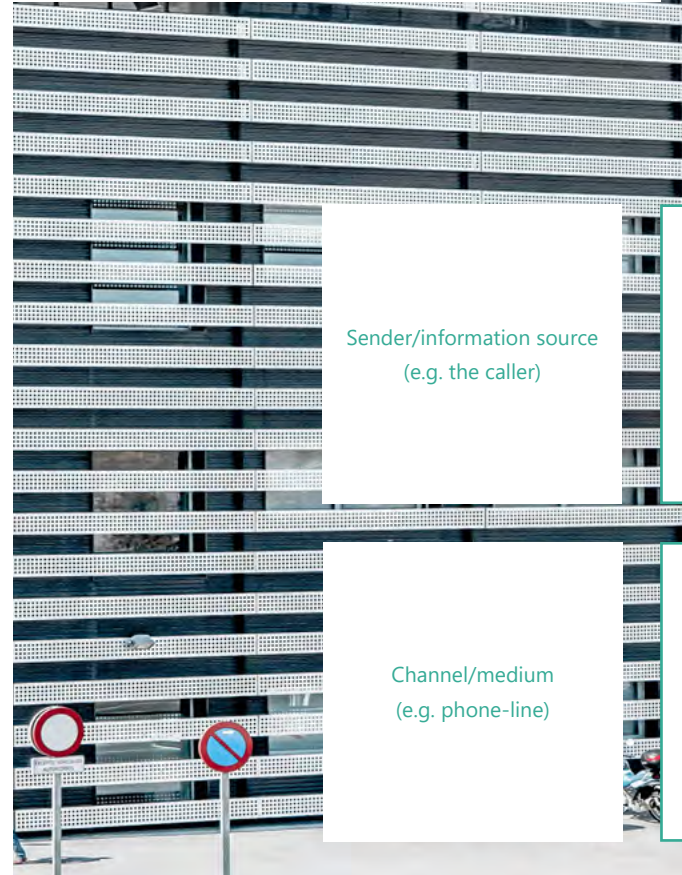
Secondly, the definition reminds us that there are multiple media in which we can communicate. This is of course intuitive in retrospect, but we can expand this further and think not just about the media but also the type and style of content. This is an idea I will expand upon later in this ebook.

Building on the Definition: A Communications Model

Casting back to my university days, I remember briefly covering a few telecommunication related topics.



The vast majority of my studies were in business and business practice, but I found the telecommunication module extremely interesting. I remember coming across a general model of electronic communication. The model discussed how, when transmitting a message (e.g. a telephone call over a wire) you will have a:



Sender/information source
(e.g. the caller)

Message
(e.g. a person's voice)

Transmitter/encoder
(e.g. the phone/phone exchange)

Channel/medium
(e.g. phone-line)

Receiver/decoder (e.g. the
phone/phone exchange at
the recipient end)

Recipient/Destination
(e.g. the person hearing
the message)

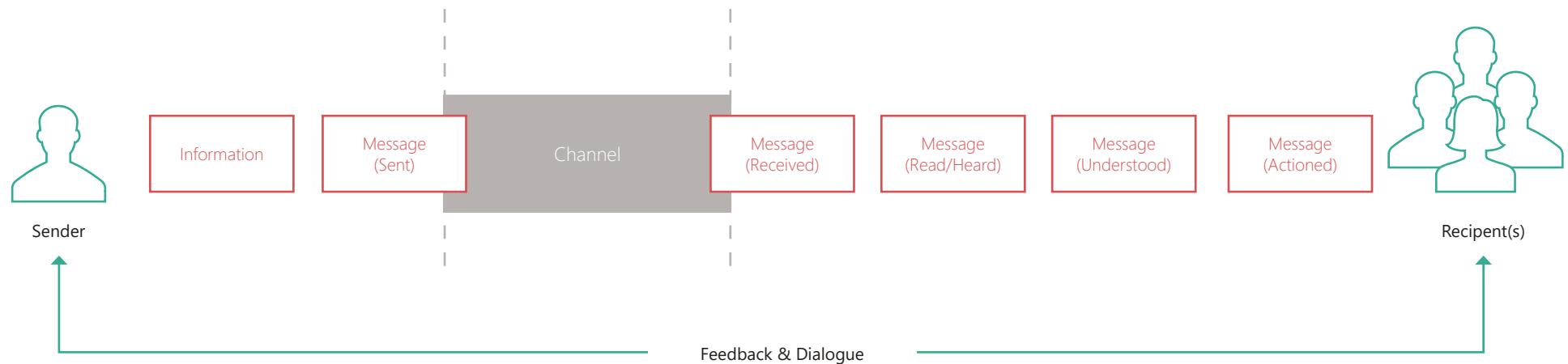
Crucially, you will also have noise or interference on the channel/medium on which you are transmitting, and the communication system needs to take this into account.

Whilst this might sound rather abstract, it is a very useful model for communicating in a business context also. Abstracting away some of the detail, and expanding and adapting the model we arrive at the following diagram:

This model can become a useful 'thinking tool' for us as practitioners when we are considering how to communicate and engage. Each step on the diagram provides us with a decision, and considering these decisions up front can help ensure our activities lead to engagement and understanding. Each element is described further below.

Figure 1: Adapted Communication Model

(Inspired by Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication)



Recipients

When needing to communicate information about a project or a change, it is worth first considering the right hand side of the diagram and asking who the recipients are.

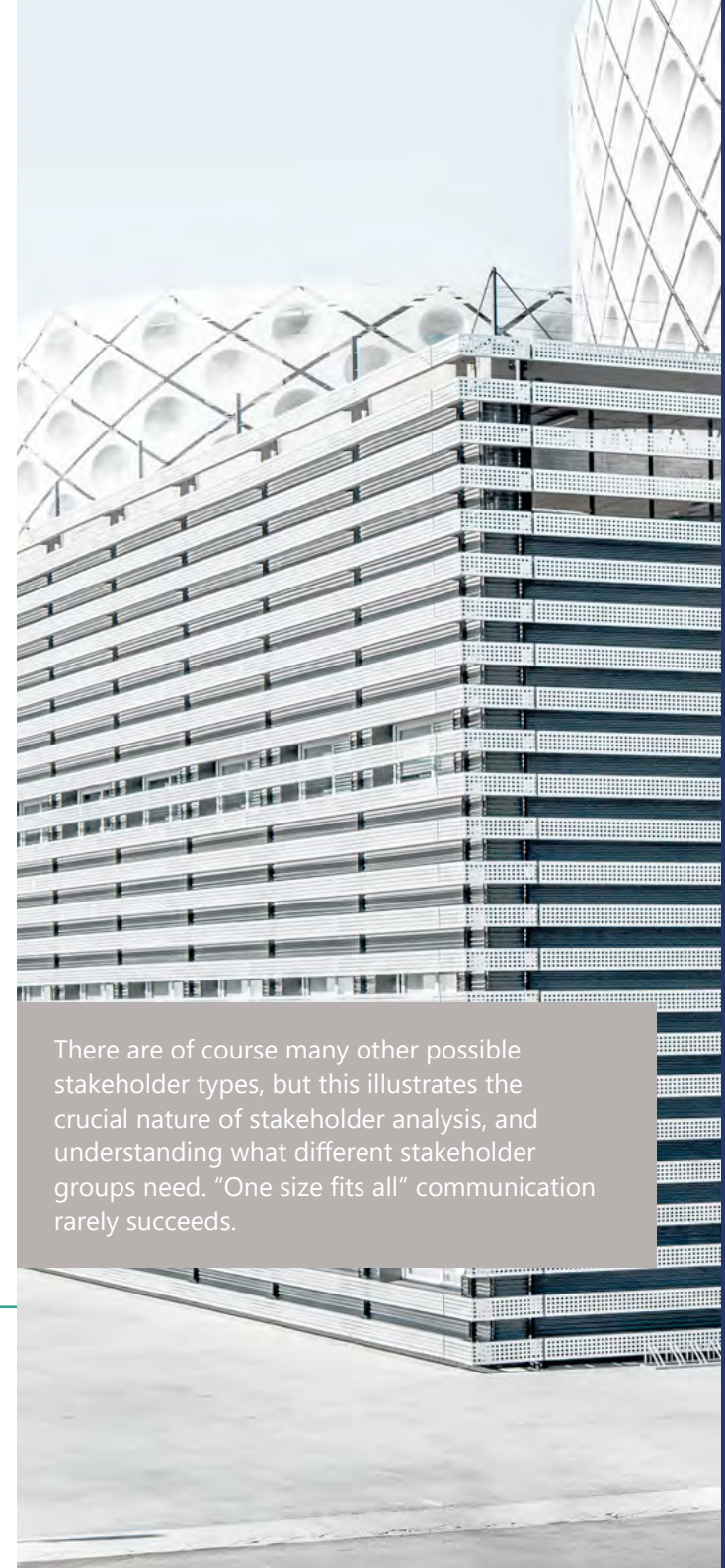
Often projects issue multi-purpose blanket communication that try to cover so many angles, resulting in very few people reading or understanding it. Good quality stakeholder analysis helps here – understanding the different types of stakeholder with whom we are communicating, and what their needs, fears and aspirations are can help us tailor the content, style and channel for the message. For example, if we are communicating early on in a project:

End Users of a System or Process: May be interested in a brief overview of why the changes are being progressed, when they are coming, and when they will be consulted further. They are also likely to be interested in how they can contribute, and this is a perfect opportunity to recruit future 'champions' or 'superusers'.

Customers: People interfacing with the process from the outside are likely to care about how the change impacts them; they are likely to be interested in how the inputs or outputs change. Sometimes the change might be invisible to them – in which case we might not need to specifically draw attention to the change at all. Other times, there might be disruption in a transition period which we can sign-post. As with all stakeholders, expectation management is crucial.

Line Managers: Are likely to be interested in how the change will affect their staff, and are likely to need concise and credible information with which they can answer further questions if asked. In many cases, prior communication and guidance should be issued to them.

There are of course many other possible stakeholder types, but this illustrates the crucial nature of stakeholder analysis, and understanding what different stakeholder groups need. "One size fits all" communication rarely succeeds.



Information, Message & Channel



When considering imparting information or consulting with stakeholders, it is important for us to ask ourselves the purpose of the communication.

What information are we planning to convey? Why will this be of interest to the recipients? This will help us craft the raw information into a message.

Crafting a compelling message is a deceptively difficult task, and is inextricably linked to the channel that we will also be communicating in.

It is therefore worth considering the channel we will use and the content that we will include to communicate the message – and in doing so, ensuring we align both to the needs of our recipients and stakeholders.

Possible channels range from face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, phone calls right through to emails and physical postal mail or 'desk drops'. A quick brainstorm can uncover a myriad of different possibilities, some useful examples are shown in the following table:

Channel	Content Types Include	Uses Include	Drawbacks	Example
Face-to-face, 1-to-1 meetings Or synchronous virtual 1-to-1 meetings/calls	Conversations	Eliciting individual views Consulting on contentious issues Building individual buy-in	Only practical for a small number of stakeholders	One-to-one interviews with key 'champion' users prior to a roadshow to gauge existing knowledge, opinion and appetite for change.
Face-to-face: workshops, meetings, 'town hall' sessions or roadshows Or synchronous virtual equivalent meetings	Presentations Q&A Post-presentation ad-hoc individual conversations	'Broadcasting' a standard message Getting immediate feedback Building collective buy-in Addressing concerns	Can be expensive to arrange Requires arranging large numbers of stakeholders to be in the same place at the same time	Communicating information about an upcoming process change initiative, inviting people to come forward if they would like to become actively involved.
Corporate Intranet or Internet pages	Text Images/Diagrams Video Animations Audio/Podcast	'Broadcasting' a standard message	Will require 'signposting' – else people may miss it	Providing regular 'light-touch' updates about a change initiative for those that are actively seeking them.
Email	Text Links to Intranet/Internet Links to Video, Audio, Animations	'Broadcasting' a standard message Eliciting feedback	Often people are swamped with email For some occupations, emails may be rarely read (e.g. non-office roles)	Providing specific, targeted, concise updates to target stakeholders. Soliciting feedback on ideas.
Notice-boards/Desk-drops	Text Images/Diagrams Links to other materials	'Broadcasting' a standard message Eliciting feedback (e.g. via a survey) Since many roles receive little 'physical' post, may be noticed over email	Can be costly compared to email to produce and ship	Provision of specific information close to launch date of a new system or process – a printed copy can always be 'close at hand'.

Figure 2: Some possible communication channels and content styles

Of course, the communication mechanisms available to us may be affected and influenced by the budget and technology that we have available at our disposal, but it is certainly useful to consider the right options for the message that we are going to convey.

Some complex messages – and those which require discussion and engagement – may well be better communicated face-to-face (or in a virtual, synchronous meeting) rather than via email.

Even more routine messages may be enhanced through the use of diagrams, images or even videos or animation. It is relatively easy and inexpensive to record short videos or 'slide-casts' these days, which can bring life to a complex message. But as with all of these decisions, we should consider what will land best with our audience and craft the message to be useful to them.

We should also pay attention to the 'noise' that exists in our channel of communication. If we are proposing a meeting, what will make our meeting stand out, so that our recipients will accept it (rather than declining it, or finding an excuse to drop out at the last minute)? If we are sending an email, what will make it a compelling read amongst the 150 others our recipient receives that day?

This loops us back to thinking from our recipients' perspective, thinking what the change initiative means for them and tailoring the message to be as compelling as possible. Take the following two example subject lines: Which email would you open first?

From: John Smith
To: All Staff
Subject: Project XYZA phase 2 update to all staff

From: John Smith
To: Accounts Receivable
Subject: Improving the invoicing system – we'd value your help & input! Please reply by COB 30th Feb

Tailoring the message and taking time to craft it carefully will pay dividends in the long run.

Message: Received through to Actioned (and the Importance of Feedback)

Knowing a message has been sent isn't the same as knowing it has been received. Equally, sending, transmitting or announcing a message doesn't mean that it's been fully received, understood and actioned.

Imagine a fictional CEO who is frustrated that the organizations strategy isn't well understood throughout the organization:


"I just can't understand it. We publish our full strategy deck on the intranet, we publish an annual report, we hold annual road-shows and paint the corporate vision & mission on our wall and still people tell me they don't know anything about our strategy!"

Perhaps this sounds familiar. Indeed, perhaps on our projects we feel similar, and might hear ourselves saying things like:

→ “I just can’t understand it. We publish the full project objectives on the department intranet, we push out regular project updates, have held road-shows and still the core teams involved in the process seem surprised that it is changing!”

In both hypothetical examples there was no lack of communicating but we could argue there is a lack of communication. A core part of the definition of communication reflected on the imparting and exchange of information – and figure 1 expanded upon this to consider the idea that a message must be received, understood and (where relevant) actioned.

The types of ‘fire and forget’ communication fall foul of this issue as no feedback is sought. There are three important considerations for us as practitioners when communicating and seeking to engage with our stakeholders:



Communication requires re-enforcement:

It isn't 'one and done'. To engender true understanding often there is a journey, involving multiple types of communication over an extended period (with multiple opportunities for discussion and engagement).


Communication requires feedback

It is impossible to know whether our message has truly 'landed' unless we build in a feedback mechanism. This might be as simple as going out and asking people their views, or it may require a more structured forum for feedback. Either way, it is crucial to build feedback mechanisms from the very beginning. Feedback is one way of encouraging and building engagement and mutual understanding.

Communication can't be controlled top-down

As much as we might kid ourselves that communication can be completely managed or controlled, the reality is quite different. People will talk. They will forward on emails. And if there is a vacuum of communication, they will (quite understandably) form their own hypothesis of what is to come. Yet, this can all be very positive – why not give people something to share. Encourage them to talk to colleagues, to get feedback, and to share that feedback with us. Moving towards a social organization – where ideas spread not only formally but informally – will cultivate a culture where communicating is easier than we have seen in the past.

Conclusion



Communication can make or break a project. It can be tempting to minimize the effort of communicating by relying on broadcast emails, but this may lead to longer-term problems and disengagement.

Time spent up-front analyzing the stakeholder landscape, and understanding how to communicate, and in what channels will pay dividends in the long run. Regular communication is important, and engaging and providing opportunities for feedback are crucial too.

References and Further Reading



References

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Oxford Dictionaries Online. (2016). "Communication" in Oxford Dictionaries Online (Premium). [online] Available at: <https://premium.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/communication> [Accessed 29 Nov. 2016].

Shannon & Weaver, Cited In Communication Theory. (2016). Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication. [online] Available at: <http://communicationtheory.org/shannon-and-weaver-model-of-communication/> [Accessed 29 Nov. 2016].

Further Reading

Readers interested in the topics discussed in this paper may find the following resources useful:

Cadle, J., Paul, D. and Yeates, D. J. (eds) (2014). Business Analysis. Swindon: BCS Learning & Development Limited.

IIBA, (2015). Guide to the business analysis body of knowledge. Toronto : Ontario: International Institute of Business Analysis.

Pullan, P, Archer, J et al (2013) Business Analysis & Leadership : Influencing Change, Kogan Page, London

Reed, A "Adrian Reed's Blog" [Online] <http://www.adrianreed.co.uk>

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