

Effective Project Management

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Effective communications is the single most important attribute of successful project management. Efficient meetings are crucial to project progress and promoting a sense of membership within a team. At the same time, managing daily communications within the team is also important, as team members can be overwhelmed by dominating or argumentative personality types or simply be overcome by the number of lines of communication existing within the organization. Proper use of technology can mitigate these problems, but the context of the communications and the personal preferences of those using the mediums must be taken into consideration.

Bradbury and Garrett take something of a pessimistic position on meetings. They stress the costliness of meetings, which sums the collective hourly-expense of each employee multiplied by the meeting length. They cite numerous examples of meetings as an inefficient use of time (Bradbury and Garrett, 2005). In the Blue Group, we experienced a brief surge of online collaboration, a form of asynchronous meeting, which dwindled down to barely any contributions at all in the second half of the semester. As the reluctant team leader, I found that much of the content of my posts were completely ignored, which led me to wondering if it was my writing style that evoked apathy or if it was the nature of the bulletin board medium to exaggerate the behaviors of “Meeting Skippers” and “Shy Types,” of which I definitely consider myself one of the latter. In contrast to Bradbury and Garrett, Demarco and Lister, of *Peopleware* fame, argued that it was important to have daily meetings with no other purpose than to reaffirm the team organization (Demarco and Lister, 1999), and in my organization, several levels of management believe strongly in this exercise, as does the Agile Scrum methodology,

where a “Scrum” is a brief, standing meeting for team members to establish their action items for the day (Control Chaos, 2009).

The danger of daily meetings comes when there are “dominators” and argumentative personalities in the personnel mix (Bradbury and Garrett, 2005). I have experienced meetings that have lasted all day, spilling into off-hours because these personalities thrive off conflict and hearing themselves talk. Our team nicknamed one such personality “the curmudgeon” for his uncanny ability to find something to argue about in every meeting, refusing to let us go back to work until his concerns were resolved, which was impossible, because satisfying one concern only led to another, until, eventually, we worked our way back to his original concern, which was somehow unresolved once again. In these cases, it was crucial to have a “loudmouth” present to put direct conversations back into productive territory (Bradbury and Garrett, 2005). This conflict does not confine itself to meetings either, as these extroverted personalities have the propensity to form ad hoc meetings when they go to collaborate with another member of the team, and end up dragging everyone else into a debate. As team size increases, the number of communications channels grows at a nearly exponential rate of $n(n-1)/2$ (Schwalbe, 2007). This means the damage dominating or argumentative extroverts can do increases along the same growth rate. In my personal experience, in the field of software engineering, I have found that the Model-View-Controller (MVC) pattern of layering software, which separates the business, user-interface, and control programming into distinct realms (Krasner and Pope, 1988), helps to mitigate the communication channel problem. While the team size remains the same, individuals are limited to collaborating only with programmers working on layers they need to interact with. This is similar to a

chain of command principle, which is also about establishing lines of communication (Tanguay, 2006), and insulating members of the chain from being swamped with the lines of communication within the organization.

Another means of diffusing the deleterious effects of too many meetings and overwhelming communication lines is technology. Information distribution benefits from the Information Revolution, but only when used properly. For instance, distributing documents via e-mail creates multiple copies of the same document stored on everyone's computer (Bradbury and Garrett, 2005), while storing these documents on an intranet provides a central repository and only one source for truth within the organization. At the same time, a bulletin board, blog, or wiki is of no use if no one reads it. Schwalbe cites Tess Galati's "Media Choice Table" as an outline of what mediums are appropriate for specific communications content. In this table, direct, real-time communications are indispensable when dealing with sensitive subjects such as commitment, resolving misunderstandings, or communicating irony, while e-mail was more efficient at conveying simple information, making simple requests, or maintaining a permanent record (Schwalbe, 2007). There is also the matter of personal preference; luddites will be more prone to use real-time communications methods, while geeks will prefer chat room and forums.

While meetings are costly and, if poorly managed, can damage productivity and organizational morale, a lack of meetings can be even more damaging, grinding a project to a complete halt and damaging team unity. At the other end of the spectrum is the need to prohibit unproductive communication, inhibiting lines of communication and preventing overbearing personalities from damaging overall productivity requires

constant vigilance. Using new mediums of communication can also mitigate the negative effects of too much or unproductive communication, but only if employed within the proper context and with consideration to the technological sophistication of the participants. All of these complex dynamics of professional relationships emphasize the importance of effective communications in project management, without which, the project cannot exist.

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