

Communications antislip training for project managers

The difference between slip and grip.

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This article will focus on communications between large independent project teams¹ and the organizations for which they work. We can compare a project team with a bus, that needs to be brought from point A to point B by the project leader. Precisely as in traffic, there are several rules to the communications game. They increase the chance that you cross the traffic undamaged. Unfortunately these rules are not learned at the mother's knee and are therefore not a part of our basic set of competencies.

The resemblances between communication and traffic are inexhaustible. This makes it possible, for instance, to speak about driving habits, traffic signals, or even traffic jams and sneak or by-pass routes. But let us start at the beginning, namely those things that you must learn in the communications driving school, before you start off on the road.

Lesson 1: Map Reading (interested parties)

It is important to find out as much as possible in advance about the different interested parties ('stakeholders'). This is done by means of a stakeholder analysis. Such an analysis is simpler than the word itself would lead one to suspect. It comes down to not only identifying the interested parties, but also our own assumptions regarding them. If the exercise is carried out well, a discussion will follow in which the different perceptions are tested against one another. A consensus is then reached regarding the list of interested parties, and this is how you arrive at a (surprisingly) more complete picture, than if you had done this exercise individually. The result can take the form of a stakeholder map and can, for instance, look like this:



A stakeholder map is the landscape through which you have to direct your vehicle. It can look fairly rough in the beginning and it can change over time.

Does it look fairly regular and flat on the whole? Then ask yourself the question, whether you haven't made a map for air traffic. Your project is a vehicle with four wheels and no wings. So you will need a detailed map that includes all obstacles, hills and tunnels.

¹ This concerns teams that have a sufficient amount of autonomy in relationship to the organization for which they work. In the relevant literature they are often referred to as 'heavyweight teams', 'autonomous teams' or even 'Tiger Teams' (Clark & Wheelwright, 1992).

Buzzword detector: "stakeholders"

A stakeholder is 'any party that affects or is affected by an organization and its policies'. In other words, every interested party that has a relationship to the project. This concept was created in the 60's and has been filling the bookshelves in libraries ever since.

In practice we must remember two things:

1. An organization is not necessarily a thing per se but a series of relationships between a wide series of parties.
2. Mapping out the stakeholders is a necessary evil. If the exercise is carried out thoroughly, then all the pre-suppositions, misunderstandings and preconceptions will become apparent. These are harmonised, until the team has a common view of its stakeholders. Eventually - and you will find very little on this in the libraries - the team creates a virtual reality and will realise this vision. Mapping or identifying, does not mean that we are searching for 'the truth' or 'objectivity', but rather that we are looking for a common perception. To say it in the words of a management guru:
Organizations end up being what they think and say, as their ideas and visions realize themselves. (*Morgan, 1998*).

Lesson 2: The right Fuel (your team)

It's not necessary that all passengers have a driver's license, when bringing a bus with 100 people from point A to point B. It's rather handy on long trips though, if someone can cook and someone else manages the budget. Someone who is good at map reading is also useful, etc...

In the language of the applicable literature this is known as requisite variety. Make sure

that the composition of your team displays the same complexity as the environment in which it must survive. We borrow this idea from systems thinking (Ashby, 1956). If the bus must spend days driving through a desert, then it is good to have someone on board who knows which cactuses are edible.

Do you want to be sure? Take a look at the stakeholder map of the project and ask yourself, whether your team can cope with each important stakeholder.

Lesson 3: Where are we and where are we going to?

Once you have drawn up a map of the surroundings, you will want to know where you are at and where you are going.

What are the goals of your team and what is excluded? Black on white. The importance of this information may not be underestimated. Every member of your team must be able to provide this information, so that they can act as ambassadors of the project.

The importance of clear goals has been emphasised by a five-year research for 461 American companies, which was carried out by The Jensen Group and Northern Illinois University College of Business in 1997. They discovered that complexity in teams and organisations is not an external factor, but rather an 'in-house' creation. They documented the four primary sources of 'work complexity', namely:

1. An inadequate integration of initiative in the organisation;
2. Unclear goals;
3. How we communicate;
4. How we share knowledge and make it available.

This top four emphasises the importance of the relationship between project teams and the organisation for which they work. It is the primary task of the project leader to manage these relationships, by making sure that these top four items are positively integrated in the core activities of the team.

Lesson 4: Reading Road-signs (feedback)

The meaning of your message can only be derived from the reaction of the receiver. You can have the best of intentions as a sender, but the only thing that counts is how your message lands with the receiver. A communication is therefore only complete when you have received feedback. Gradually you will regularly want to check, whether you are on the right path. If not, then you adapt. Without blushing and if necessary, you'll return down the road a bit and admit your communications errors.

Many of us would rather continue down the wrong road, than turn back and ask for directions. As if we did not want to hear the feedback.

Equipment is missing

As a project leader you will spend more time on communications, than on any other activity. Somewhere along the line you suspect that communication should be a two-way process. Unfortunately we are only equipped for one-way traffic. The average grown-up in our society has never been taught how to listen, as the table below shows so strikingly.

Skills	Years of corresponding education	Degree of use in the life of a grown-up
Writing	14	Little
Reading	8	A little bit
Speaking	1	Somewhat
Listening	0	Very much

Bron: Hersey P., Blanchard K., Johnson D. (1996) Management of Organizational Behavior, Prentice Hall, pagina 339.

Further research has shown that in communicating we spend approximately 45% of our time listening. Moreover, the aver-

age listener understands and remembers approximately half of what has been said, immediately after a presentation. Within 48 hours this decreases to 22%.

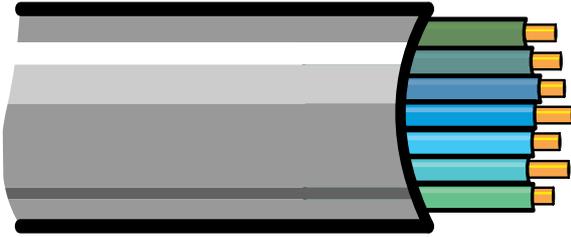
Listening is therefore a crucial management skill and, up to the present time, an almost unexplored area.

Lesson 5: Know your vehicle

With 'vehicle' we mean the communications channel. Aim for redundancy in your message and in the medium. In everyday language this means that we have to send the same message over several channels (redundancy of media), and that we have to formulate the message in several different manners (redundancy in the message).

Each medium has specific properties, which make it more or less suitable for a certain type of message, or for reaching a certain target group. If possible and above all other media, you should opt for face-to-face communication. In the drawing below we illustrate why face-to-face communication is and stays so important.

This way you can define a route for every message, by way of the different media that are at your disposal.



- Message Text
- Eye contact
- Voice level and articulation
- Body language
- Context in which the message is received
- Timing of message reception
- Feedback

- In face-to-face communication all the wires are in use, which is the best guarantee that the shipment will arrive in the right form;
- In telephone communications the wires for eye contact, body language and the context in which the message is received, are not used.
- Have you decided to communicate by e-mail? Then you place all your bets on that one wire, namely the 'message text'. The unused wires determine the possibilities for errors in your communications.

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Illustration: The face-to-face communications channel is like an electrical cable with seven wires

Lesson 6: The right driver for every route

The credibility of a message is equivalent to the status of the messenger. The status of the project staff members is usually not calibrated to the hierarchy of the organisation, or it may have blurred over time. Their messages can therefore sound ambiguous, which is why these are best introduced by persons with management responsibility.

Management staff is crucial here: we not only assume that our boss is better informed than we are; his or her commitment also determines mine. For the same reason we are also on the lookout for opinion leaders. In some groups this is clearer than in others; but it is no secret that there are always informal leaders who can influence the opinion of the group.

Sometimes members of a project team get in the drivers' seat themselves. At such moments they must understand that they are transporting the entire project team. There is no room for ego at the steering wheel of your project.

Lesson 7: The freight (message)

Personally relevant information is remembered better. We must pay attention to the question, 'what does it mean for the receiver?'

This means that we not only pay attention to the 'what, where, how, and when', but especially also the 'why' and 'what do we do with the feedback'.

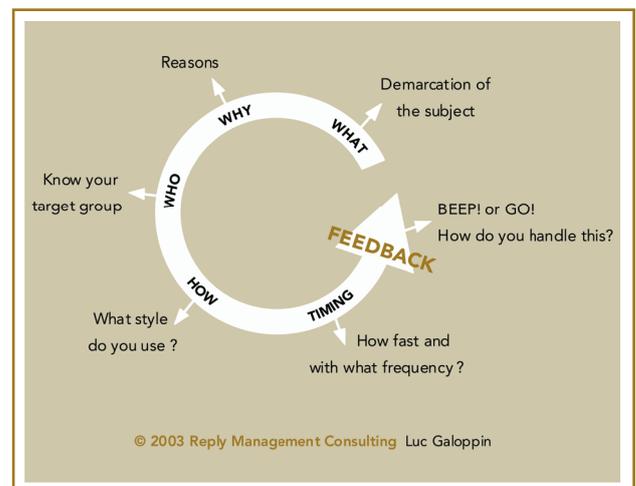


Illustration: taking the communications curve with sufficient grip prevents slip

Lesson 8: Directional speed (timing)

We do not want to be driven off the road, nor do we want to receive a fine for speeding. In other words: we want to communicate fast enough so that our messages still have news value, and our decisions, on the other hand, are only communicated after they have been validated.

As an information provider we aim for reliability, even if this means that we are often running behind compared to informal channels of information (lobby gossip).

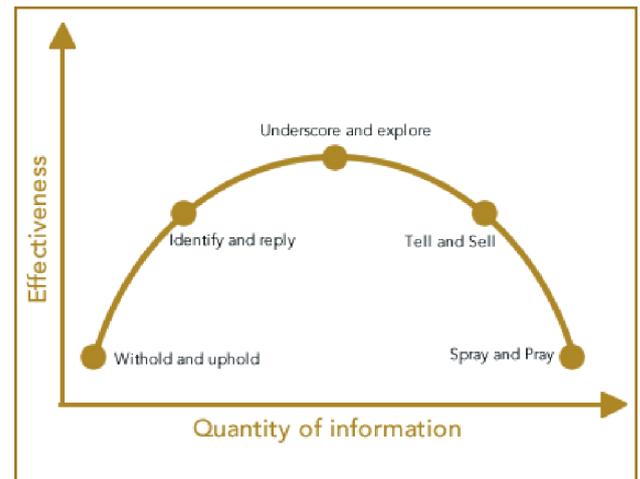
Lesson 9: Driving manners (communication style)

Style in communications has very much to do with the openness of information (expressed in the quantity of information that is provided). The relationship to the effective use of the communications is shown in the illustration below. The message here is: 'more is not always better'.

The chart is read as follows:

- **Withhold and uphold:** Knowledge is power. We only release information when we are forced to do so. Giving little information results in reduced effectiveness (meaning: confusion and disorientation).
- **Identify and reply:** Providing information at a personal level; addressing each staff member within his/her personal frame of reference is more effective, but not always optimal. Advantage: two-directional traffic. Disadvantage: you have not created a general frame of reference, which leaves the door open for many deviations and exceptions. Such a communications policy is adjusted on an individual basis. This is time-consuming and not very effective.
- **Underscore and explore:** This style is optimal, because here you permit two-directional traffic within a general frame of reference. You first mark out the terrain (you create the frame of reference), and only then do you resume communicating. Because you have started by staking out the playing field, it immediately becomes clear what is given a chance and what is not. The communication that takes place thereafter is limited to this marked out playing field. This saves time and all noses will point in the same direction.

- **Tell and sell:** More information is passing more frequently through the organisation, yet its effectiveness is declining. Even though there is a well-cared-for presentation and layout, no room remains for interaction. No adjustments will be made, because feedback is lacking, and all the messages will sound the same and have a deadening effect. Paralysing jams in communications traffic will be the result, and the attention will focus on bypass channels of communication.
- **Spray and pray:** A paragon of openness; "I share all information with my colleagues; I am an open book". What a shame, because too much information has the same effect as too little: confusion and disorientation.



Based on: Clampitt, P.G., De Koch, R.J. en Cashman, T. (2000)

This chart teaches us that good communications are truly an exercise of balance, which can only be learned by making errors and adapting.

Lesson 10: The dashboard

Before you start the motor, there are still a number of signal lights on the dashboard that have to be turned off. These do of course vary from vehicle to vehicle. One thing they all have in common; it is best not to depart before all the lamps are extinguished. Here is a suggestion on how such a control panel can look like:

Signal lights

OK?

- | | | |
|---|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | WHAT-lamp
Is the goal of the message clear? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | WHY-lamp
Are you communicating anything about the necessity or reasons? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | WHO-lamp
Define the target group. Who is, and who is not a part of that group? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 | SENDER-lamp
Per target group: Which spokesman/woman is best to put the message into words? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 | HOW-lamp
Per target group: Which channel? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 | SPEED INDICATOR and REV COUNTER
- Speed ► Depends on the type of message and the channel
- Frequency: is repetition necessary? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 | FEEDBACK-lamp
Is a response desirable? If yes, are we prepared for this? | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Finally...

The difference between slip and grip in communications often determines the result of a project. The above lessons make it clear that this concerns basic communicating skills. That is why the original title of this article was 'driving lesson in communicating'. Just like me, you are probably convinced that you already have a sufficient mastery of the basics.

After completing this article, I was no longer so sure of myself. We still are slipping all too often under normal weather conditions, so that we should question whether we have really mastered the basics sufficiently.

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