IT Project Communication: An Investigation of Its Dimensions and Relationship to Project Success

Jo Ann Starkweather Bigbee, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, USA
Deborah H. Stevenson, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, USA

ABSTRACT

The critical nature of information flow as a precursor to project success has been affirmed by both scholars and project management professionals. The data analyzed in this study represent the perceptions of 91 IT project professionals regarding the importance of 18 different aspects of project communication to project success. The relationship of these data vis-a-vis project manager demographics and project/organizational characteristics is explored. Despite a relatively high level of agreement across the respondents regarding which communications are perceived critical to project success, there are clear project and stakeholder circumstances that warrant consideration. The data reveal both statistical and practical dimensions of communication that attribute importance to project success differently for internal as compared to external communication. Furthermore, the emergence of average project duration as a consistently strong correlate of perceived importance of communication to project success is an area of research deserving greater attention.

KEYWORDS

IT Project Communication, IT Project Success, Project Communication Model, Project Duration

INTRODUCTION

When considering all the factors posited to impact project success, communication is consistently a front runner on the list. With such consensus on the pivotal role of communication, scholarship that captures the true nature of information sharing in project teams is a necessary first step to assessing and improving the effectiveness of communication, and ultimately, project success. Furthermore, scholarship in the nascent discipline of project management is inherently involved in model building. Since the theoretical framework imposed on a research endeavor determines the assumptions made and the questions asked a priori, the decision of which theory to use in conducting PM communication research has an impact. Among the many possible theoretical paradigms, most perspectives can be categorized under functional, critical, or symbolic interaction frameworks. Briefly, a functional approach begins with an assumption that the present circumstances under investigation are functioning to fulfill an intended purpose and assessment is used to establish the validity of this assumption. While

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it may not be specifically stated, functional theory is often employed when there is a preference to maintain the status quo. A critical framework begins with an assumption of unequal power among participants in the circumstances being evaluated and the research design would test this assumption and the desirability of the unequal power distribution. Finally, a symbolic interaction perspective focuses on the meaning of the message being communicated and whether sender and receiver share the same meaning attached to the message.

A discussion of the application of each of the major theoretical perspectives within the context of communication research follows. Examples of how the assumptions of each theory might be manifest in the project management milieu are offered as illustrative of how the choice of a particular theoretical framework may shape the type of data collected and the eventual interpretation of same. This theoretical overview is provided for the purpose of comparison among several potential frameworks and is not intended to highlight all the nuances of a given paradigm.

COMMUNICATION VIEWED THROUGH A THEORETICAL LENS

Visually, a single act of communication is often depicted by silhouettes of two “talking heads” facing each other (sender and receiver), and a line (channel and message) connecting the heads. This familiar visual illustrates key assumptions often made regarding communication. i.e., communication is direct, between equals, and is without interference.

Another way to visualize acts of communication taking into account the assumptions of the three major theoretical perspectives mentioned previously is depicted in Figure 1. The circle on the left depicts a functionalist perspective in that the horizontal, linear arrows suggest information exchanges between persons of equal power, i.e., on the same line. The middle circle represents a critical perspective in that it indicates a power differential between sender and receiver (left and right arrow heads) with the inclusion of a north-south trajectory for the lines, i.e., the height differential indicates a disparity in power between sender and receiver. Finally, the circle on the right is intended to represent a symbolic interaction perspective, where the wavy lines acknowledge possible power differentials and a negotiated meaning attached to the message. There are no assumptions that agreement will be reached regarding the meaning of the message in this final scenario, rather there is an assumption that sender and receiver independently attach meaning to a given message and this meaning will be shaped by both the environment of the respective party in the communication and his/her experience.

Figure 1. Assumptions of communication power: equal power (functional), disparate power (critical), complex/situational power (symbolic interaction)
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