

Conceptual model of communication theories within project process

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Resumen: La gestión de proyectos es importante para el logro de los objetivos de la organización. Los directores de proyecto cooperan con los miembros del equipo para establecer las metas del proyecto y compartir responsabilidades. También se espera que el director del proyecto se mantenga en contacto con los miembros del proyecto a través de una comunicación regular, tanto cara a cara como mediada por ordenador. Por esta razón, la comunicación forma la parte más importante de la gestión de proyectos. Proyecto, los gerentes deben ser capaces de comunicarse oportuna y efectivamente para asegurar que todos los miembros del equipo estén informados sobre el progreso del proyecto. El canal de comunicación también determina cómo se pasa la información. Se espera que el director del proyecto use el canal correcto para el público adecuado. En este artículo, se discuten cuatro teorías de la comunicación que mejoran el éxito en la gestión de proyectos. Pensar en grupo implica evitar los conflictos en la toma de decisiones siguiendo la opinión de los demás. Como se observará, el pensamiento colectivo se desaconseja en la gestión de proyectos, ya que conduce a la dominación de la toma de decisiones por parte de unos pocos individuos del grupo. Es posible que los miembros no estén dispuestos a trabajar hacia los objetivos fijados, especialmente si los objetivos se establecieron a través de un consenso mayoritario. La teoría de la difusión de la comunicación también explica cómo los nuevos puntos de vista e ideas se difunden a través de las culturas. Una buena gestión de proyectos requiere un cambio en los métodos de comunicación y un lenguaje basado en el contexto de la comunicación. En este trabajo se desarrollan tres hipótesis, junto con un modelo conceptual que refleja la idea del artículo.

Palabras clave: Teoría de la comunicación, Proceso de proyecto, Modelo conceptual de comunicaciones.

Abstract: Project Management is important for attainment of organizational goals. Project managers cooperate with the members of the team to set the project goals and share responsibilities. The project manager is also expected to keep in touch with the project members through regular communication, both face-to-face and computer-mediated. For this reason, communication forms the most important part of project management. Project, managers should be able to communicate timely and effectively to ensure that all the team members are informed about the progress of the project. The communication channel also determines how the information is passed. The project manager is expected to use the right channel to the right audience. In this paper, four theories of communication are discussed that enhance success in project management. Groupthink involves the avoidance of conflicts in decision making by following the opinion of others. As will be noted, groupthink is discouraged in project management since it leads to domination of decision making by a few individuals in the group. The members may not be willing to work towards the set goals, especially if the goals were set through a majority consensus. The diffusion theory of communication also explains how new viewpoints and ideas spread through cultures. Good project management requires change of communication methods, and language based on the context of communication. Three

hypotheses are developed in this paper along with a conceptual model that reflects the idea of the paper.

Keywords: Communication theory, Project Process, Communications conceptual model.

Introduction

Projects are crucial frameworks to implement change. Their management requires a comprehensive conceptual foundation to determine the factors that impact change and success. The success of any project depends on the capability of the project members and the team leader to communicate timely and effectively. Effective communication in project management requires careful planning and setting of the right expectations with all the stakeholders of the project.

Project communication starts with face-to-face interaction among the members to establish the goals and team dynamics and learning the customer's expectations. Project management theory has been developed and built upon the theories of communication to determine project success. Today, many organizations use projects as a way of attainment of competitive advantage in the global markets. The increased focus on projects by organizations has led to increased studies and literature streams dealing with project management.

Communication determines and influences the relationship between the project manager and project members and how the members work to attain the set project goals. When transparency and openness is overlooked in project management, misunderstanding may result among the members, a factor that may lead to project failure. Communication also enhances contribution and sharing of ideas from all the project members. Nevertheless, communication in project management ought to be conducted in all directions. This is the only way that the members will feel accountable of their roles and duties for the attainment of project goals and objectives.

As one of the most crucial aspects in project management, this paper provides a literature review and conceptual framework on the importance of communication in project management. Communication theories have been discussed in connection with project management principles and strategies. Among the theories covered in the paper include groupthink, diffusion theory, communication accommodation theory, and social information processing theory.

Role of Communication in project success

The role of communication in project management should not be overlooked. Project managers spend most of their time communicating with individuals, groups and organizations. Studies have established that project managers spend more than 90% of their time in communication (Kloppenborg, 1900). This explains why strong communication skills are sought from candidates applying for project management. The project manager with strong communication skills impacts on the success of the organization. The manager will impact the effectiveness of the project to everyone he interacts with. This increases the chances of the project surpassing stakeholder expectations. Similarly, if the project manager possesses poor

communication skills, the project is more likely to fail since he will not be able to influence individuals and groups outside the project (Lester, & Lester, 2007). Since communication plays a crucial role in project management, it is important that project managers continuously learn the theories of communication.

An orderly project communication plan sets out the measures and standards of when and how communication takes place. The project manager is expected to set the tone of communication in order to maintain the control over the project and ensure all the necessary information gets to the stakeholders. Project management also entails setting of standards on how the participants should carry on with the communication process (Lewis, 2007). This includes planning for meetings, telephone conversations, emails, and memos. Timing is also crucial in project communication, especially when regular communication is needed. A solid plan of communication also increases the constancy of how the project is handled (Mooz, Forsberg, & Cotterman, 2003). It also ensures all the stakeholders have information concerning the project requirements, short-term and long-term goals.

Regular communication also enhances productivity of employees working on the project. The employees expect the project manager to keep them informed about important project happenings. When they are equipped with the required information, they feel more comfortable and keep working instead of pausing at some point to seek out information. Proper project communication also ensures that employees are able to work together in line with the project goals and objectives (Schmidt, 2009).

A good communication plan also enables the project manager to lead the participants to the anticipated project outcome. Communication is also required from the stakeholders in order to understand exactly what they want and how their needs can be met. For example, a project that is working on software development of a specified party must communicate regularly with the client to understand the desired specifications of the project (Taylor, & Dow, 2013). A good project manager is one who carries on with communication until the final goal of the project is attained.

In order for communication to work out effectively in project management, it must flow in all directions; upward, sideways, and downward. The participants of the project should have easy access to the project manager to communicate their concerns with guarantee that they will be addressed. When project communication only flows upwards without a downward response, the employees would feel excluded in the affairs of the project. Any project is meant to fail when the employees are not motivated to work towards the project goals (Westland, 2007). Even when material motivation is not included, inclusive communication forms a significant asset for participant motivation. Communication ensures that all the decisions and conclusions are drawn with a popular consensus.

Groupthink

Groupthink is a communication theory that explains the behavioral pattern that is demonstrated by team members in order to avoid conflict and reach to a consensus without a critical analysis of the issue (Binder, 2007). Decision-making groups tend to subdue opposing

viewpoints in order to guarantee harmony in the group. It is the tendency to involuntarily reduce opposition in decision making with hopes of increasing cohesion and reducing tension by quickly making decisions (Campbell, 2007). Groupthink can also be perceived as a form of peer pressure endorsed by the majority leaders on the team members that are less willing to contribute. Some project members encourage groupthink in order to promote cohesion and oneness among the members (Campbell, Campbell, & Campbell, 2013). Project management requires all the group members to participate in identification of the problem and solutions.

Nevertheless, groupthink should never be encouraged in project management because it may lead to group and project failure. The project becomes one-sided with major decisions only emanating from selected individuals (Campbell, 2009). The result is the promotion of close-mindedness among the participants, whereby, members will be unwilling to participate because their opinions never count in decision making. Group think also limits the ability to predict potential problems that may lead to project failure. Effective teamwork and critical evaluation of the necessary solutions is tampered with the involvement of groupthink in project communication (Furman, 2011). Submission, one of the major aspects of groupthink, may lead to domination within the project, either by the project manager or the majority group in the team. Domination makes some members feel irrelevant and excluded in major project decisions. Mutual responsibility and team work is strongly discouraged, as well as work morale of the participating members (Carroll, 2012).

Groupthink in project management also leads to feelings of worthlessness among the project members. The members may not be willing to work towards the set goals, especially if the goals were set through a majority consensus. Groupthink also impacts on employee satisfaction, cooperative engagements, and the overall performance in the workplace. It also limits the capability of the team to grow and develop when the minor viewpoints are not considered and included in decision making (Harrison, & Lock, 2004). In case of project failure, some members are left to blame one another since they feel that their contributions would have saved the project; only if they were considered.

As aforementioned, groupthink significantly contributes to project failure. Project managers should identify the ways to decrease the chances for groupthink. The project manager may appoint diverse team leaders so that a wide variety of views will be accepted and considered in decision making. The team leaders should also be made aware that every member is equally important and their contribution counts. Therefore, all the members should be given a chance to make their contributions and give suggestions before decisions are made (Kerzner, 2001). Groupthink has been identified by many scholars as one of the major reasons that lead to some members quitting the project after feeling irrelevant and not considered in decision making.

Diffusion Theory

The diffusion theory of communication explains how new viewpoints and ideas spread through cultures. Information and ideas pass through a path of communication in order to reach to the target group and the entire population. The spread of the idea is influenced by the nature of the idea that needs to be spread, the available communication channels, the social system and

time of communication (Westland, 2007). However, the channel of communication plays the most crucial role in the diffusion theory. The theory emphasizes that; it is difficult to influence or change how individuals behave and how they adopt their thinking. Some people will adopt to changes immediately while others will take time to adopt. Based on the increasing focus of globalization in project management, diversity of the members has been enhanced to ensure a multicultural representation. This is beneficial to lower groupthink tendencies.

The project manager should have the diffusion theory in mind during planning and execution of ideas in the group. Some team members can be disoriented by minor changes in the plan while others will not be affected (Campbell, 2009). All the project plans should be concrete to avoid confusion and inability to adjust by some of the members. The individual member contribution needs to be considered to avoid making awkward decisions that may end up indirectly expelling some members from the group. When the project manager is aware of the diffusion theory of communication, he can make plans and then adjust them to suit the needs of all the members (Lewis, 2007).

Diffusion theory in project management promotes openness and feelings of inclusion by the team members. However, only the individual considerations that may not negatively impact on the health of the project should be factored. The project members should determine the best way that a certain decision or communication channel will cause impact to the members. Some decisions and ideas may be shared online via email and social media while others may be shared via telephone conversation (Harrison, & Lock, 2004). However, for decisions that need face-to-face interaction, the project manager should organize for a meeting to ensure the ideas are shared and decisions and conclusions drawn from a common sense of agreement.

Studies have reported cases of project failure when the project manager does not use the right channel of communication for diffusion of ideas. Some ideas that need to be taken seriously may appear less serious based on the channel of communication adopted. For instance, using social media to pass information pertaining to change of project management may appear informal and less serious. However, when ideas are sought on merit of their importance and communicated using the right channel, project success becomes inevitable (Carroll, 2012). As would be expected, the project manager cannot call for a meeting every time a new idea or need for communication arises.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication in project management depends on the ability of the communicating parties to understand the language and context of communication. Different communication techniques are used on different parties depending on the intended purpose of the communication. At some point, informal communication may be necessary while other circumstances may require formal communication. This is as explained in the communication accommodation theory. Communication accommodation theory explains that; when people communicate, they adjust their vocal patterns and speech to accommodate the needs of the recipient of the message (Mooz, Forsberg, & Cotterman, 2003). It emphasizes on how individuals minimize communication differences by consideration of context, language, and identity. The context and identity determine the language and manner of communication. The

theory deals with both the intergroup and interpersonal cues of communication and how dominance and power may influence the communication behavior. The theory focuses on how individuals adjust to and adopt new characters in communication (Campbell, 2009). The communicating parties may either over-adjust their communication or under-adjust their communication, especially based on the audience and the idea being communicated.

Project managers are expected to learn how to accommodate their audience by adopting a method of communication that suits them and one that would best pass the message. For instance, communication between project managers of different projects would be different from communication between the project manager and the project members. The latter is also different from the communication adopted with customers, stakeholders, and investors interested with the project (Carroll, 2012). The project manager should be able to adjust the tone and method of communication when dealing with all the groups aforementioned. He should be able to pass directives to the team members on issues of project performance and the attainment of project goals, as well as convincing investors from outside to invest in the project.

Many projects have failed when the project leader is not able to communicate effectively based on the prevailing circumstances. This explains why the ability to communicate, both in speech and in writing, is one of the requirements of candidates to be considered for project management. Poor accommodation of communication may lead to the recipient of the message taking the wrong impression of the communicating party. Moreover, the project manager should also teach the project members to accommodate and adjust to communication (Lewis, 2007). Learning of communication should be encouraged as a continuous process that leads to comprehension and acquisition of the intended idea from the project manager to the team members. Intergroup communication should also be avoided in accommodation.

Social Information Processing

Social information processing theory of communication explains how individuals get to know one another without nonverbal cues. It also explains the development and management of social relationships in computer-mediated environments. It deals with online interpersonal relationship and interactions. Although online interaction may take time before becoming effective as compared to face-to-face communication, it is a good communication tool for people in diverse backgrounds, especially in the modern era of globalization (Lewis, 2007). Numerous studies have criticized the methods of online communication with the argument that they weakens the communicative capability of individuals. The formal channels of face-to-face communication that used to exist are not in use anymore as people resort to online and social media communication.

Globalization has led to project management that involves members from different countries and continents. The emergence of multinational corporations increased the diversity of project management to encompass members who may even not have interacted with the project manager face-to-face (Carroll, 2012). Therefore, project managers should learn how to interact and communicate online, as well as in a face-to-face scenario. The manager should learn to use the online information that is available to understand stakeholders and project

members online. Such information may include images, profiles, textual cues and grammar used in email communication.

The social information processing theory alleges that online communication can be more effective than face-to-face communication. Some members of the team may not be able to communicate to the project manager face-to-face but would do so in online communication. Moreover, online communication is faster since information is passed concurrently to all the project members regardless of the time or place of communication. The cues obtained from online communication can be used to develop strong bonds in the communication network (Campbell, 2009). Despite the lack of cues of social context, project managers should learn to pass information online in a manner that accommodates the needs of the recipient.

Conceptual Framework

Successful project management depends on the ability of the project manager to communicate with the members of the group and other involved stakeholders. This paper has deduced that the project manager should be able to apply the theories of communication in determination of the language suitable for different communication contexts. These ideas are built on several hypotheses:

H1: is communication a critical factor to project failure?

This hypothesis is tested by considering majority vote and ignoring minority opinions in project management. It is also tested by studying the behavior of the project members whose ideas seem to be ignored in decision making. The second hypothesis that is tested pertains to the impacts of communication accommodation in project management:

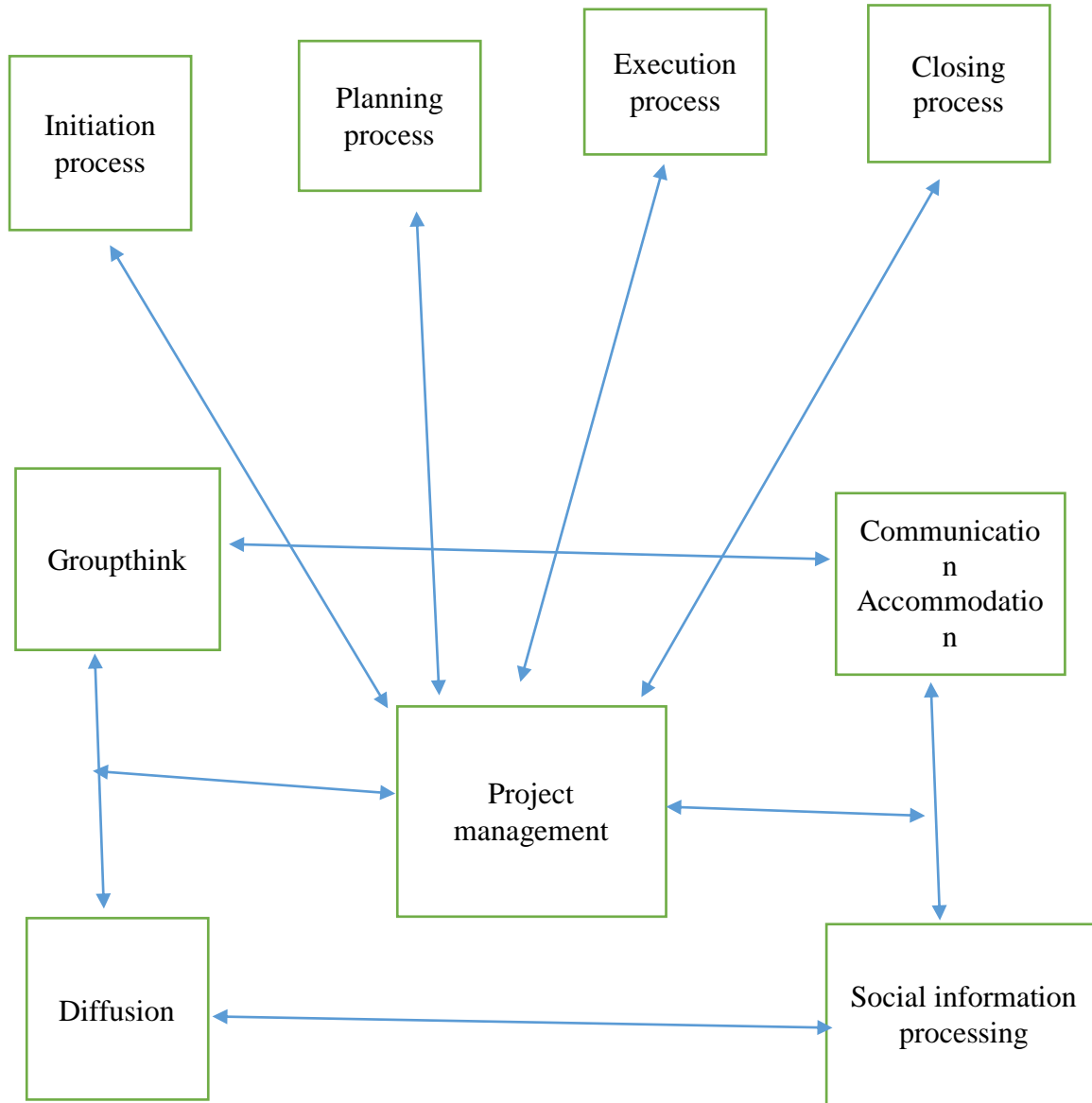
H2: if communication remains unchanged between different groups, is it likely to affect group performance?

In this hypothesis, it will be assumed that all the parties to be communicated to have a common perception of ideas. The project manager can interact with different groups without changing the language or tone of communication and learn the behavior of the members.

H3: is online communication more effective than face-to-face communication?

The hypothesis is tested through a comparative analysis of online and face-to-face communication and consideration of the perception that participants have when communication is done face-to-face and when online communication is adopted.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



From the above model, it can be realized that the entire process of project management, ranging from initiation, planning, execution and closing, relies on effective communication. Good project management evolves from effective communication that is in all directions.

Conclusion

Communication is an important facet for project management. Regular communication keeps the project members updated with the progress of the project. It also improves work morale since every member feels included in the decision making process. Implementation of decisions that one contributed to their endorsement also helps to improve performance of employees in organizations. Project managers are expected to learn the communication theories and come up with the best communication model that is suitable for the context of

communication. As has been aforementioned, all the theories of communication play a significant role in the attainment of organizational goals and objectives. Communication enhances relationships and defines the project goals. Therefore, the project manager should ensure that the decisions made take into consideration the input of all the members. As can be noted, project managers spend most of their time communicating. This stresses the importance of good communication skills in project management. Effective communication with investors, stakeholders and clients will determine the public image of the project. Moreover, among the theories of communication discussed, the groupthink theory has been identified as unsuitable in project management. It promotes individual dominance and makes some group members appear irrelevant in the group.

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