Communication Barriers in the Client's Workplace and Possible Solutions

By Deepa Gandhavalli Ramaniah, PMP

In the growing information technology (IT) industry, outsourcing competent software professionals at a lower budget has been a common phenomenon. It is not only the technical expertise that is being hired but the project management expertise as well. As a result of outsourcing, these professionals either work virtually from their base work locations or they are required to be on-site at the client's workplace. On-site, cultural differences present a common communication barrier that any outsourced professional would face; however, these days, with the increased on-site opportunities and increased exposure to different cultures, on-site professionals are able to handle such differences quite easily. In this article, I would like to highlight other communication barriers that exist when a project manager works at the client's location and manages an off-shore team by obtaining the client's scope and the ways in which these barriers can be tackled.

Communication management is the most important project management knowledge area. Ideally, a project manager should spend 90% of his or her time on communication and should ensure that the communication is effective as well as efficient. However, because of the communication barriers in the client's workplace, communication becomes a major challenge for a project

> " It is the project manager's responsibility to run the show successfully by proactively anticipating such issues and planning how to tackle them. "

manager and he or she should know how to eliminate such issues and execute the project successfully.

Here are a few common communication barriers and the solutions to tackling them. I have categorized such barriers under the four different processes (Identify Stakeholders, Plan Communications, Distribute Information, and Manage Stakeholder Expectations), highlighted under the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area and defined in *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (*PMBOK® Guide*)—Fourth Edition (PMI, 2008).

### Identify Stakeholders and Plan Communications
Problem 1:

The very first process in the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area is used to identify the stakeholders and then the stakeholder requirements. A project manager working in the client's location, however, does not get a chance to formally and verbally get introduced to all the client stakeholders. Instead, he or she gets a single point of contact from the client side, and all communications with other stakeholders are restricted to either emails or conference calls.

Solution 1:

When a new stakeholder is included in the email communications, add the stakeholder details into a
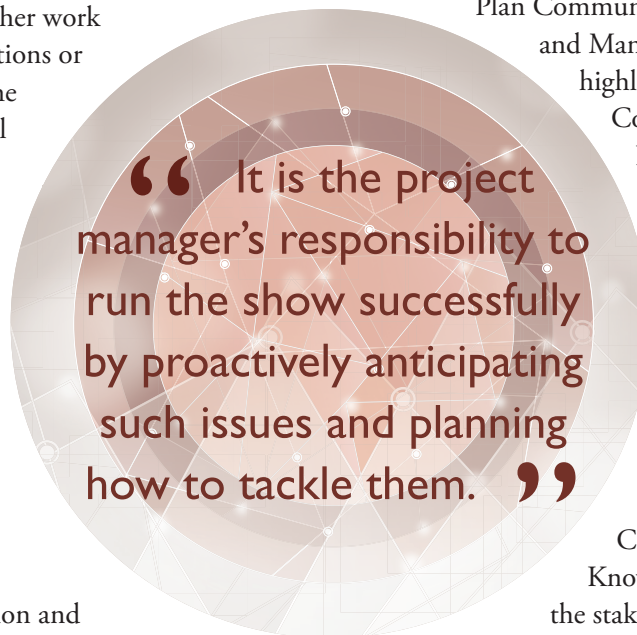
stakeholder register, which should include, but are not limited to, the name of the stakeholder, the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholder in the project, the stakeholder's expectations of the project, and cases in which the stakeholder needs to be contacted and how. Share the same information with the single point of contact and suggest arranging a face-to-face kick-off meeting with all the stakeholders to ensure that the collected requirements are correct and also to keep everyone on the same page. During the kick-off meeting, walk through the stakeholder register, set the ground rules, and modify appropriately. This meeting will also be a source for identifying new stakeholders and adding them to the register. Also, the stakeholder register serves as an input to plan the communication approach and frequency for all the identified stakeholders.

Problem 2:

Another restriction faced by the project manager is that all communication has to occur through the single point of contact from the client side. In general, the project manager handling the off-shore team will either have a client manager or a peer coordinator from the client side. Because this point of contact enforces that all communications occur through him or her, it leads to multiple levels of communication with other stakeholders in the client workplace, which can lead to delays in getting the right response and might also result in incorrect information exchange. I would like to describe a situation I often faced at my client's workplace. The testing team had some issues with testing, for which they requested assistance from a network/build team. I was the project manager, so I forwarded this request to the network team and requested their support to work on this item; however, the stakeholder I contacted was not clear as to what was expected from him. Because all these communications were taking place through emails, in this case, I preferred to stop by the network team's desk and explain what the testing team expects and, if required, get one of the testers to explain the requirement in person. This way, I could have resolved the network team's queries in one step and gotten their responses right away. In reality, however, I had to inform my point of contact and he responded back in an email explaining the need, which definitely wouldn't resolve the issue immediately (compared with my choice of communication method).

Solution 2:

In such cases, the project manager should plan to arrange weekly meetings highlighting the exact agenda, such as discussing hot issues, updates, and so forth with all the stakeholders identified during the kick-off meeting. The frequency of the meetings and the media (either in a face-to-face meeting or a conference call if the stakeholder requires the offshore team to be present) used for the meetings can be derived from the stakeholder expectations collected in the stakeholder register. In this way, all communications will be direct with the required stakeholders, resulting in sharing the correct information and getting the right response at the right time and without any delay.

Distribute Information
Problem 1:

Distributing the right information at the right point of time using the right choice of media is another important process in the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area. For a project manager who is co-located with his or her stakeholders, it is quite common that he or she will make use of face-to-face communication, rather than emails, conference calls, and so forth, which are more applicable for virtual teams. In reality, however, a project manager sitting in the client workplace generally gets to attend only conference calls more than face-to-face meetings; because of this, the issues and conflicts that could have been addressed effectively through face-to-face meetings result in multiple back-and-forth email communications and unresolved conflicts for a longer period of time, ultimately affecting the project results.

Solution 1:

It is the responsibility of the project manager to plan and execute the right mode of communication, depending on the nature, urgency, and impact of the scenario or topic under discussion. Although email communication is formally written and recommended for all complex scenarios, face-to-face communication is the preferred method whenever a quick and immediate response is expected. Later, an email can be sent as a re-cap of what was discussed so that everyone is on the same page. This is a very good practice to use to document what was discussed and decided on verbally, so that the same can be used for future reference.

Problem 2:

Another problem faced by a project manager during this process is access to the required information. In general, the outsourced associates do not get access to the entire client network, shared folders, and so forth. When a project manager requires a piece of information (e.g., a document, a link) that has restricted access, he or she has to go through his or her single point of contact and then find the actual owner of the document or link to provide the information.

Solution 2:

In such cases, the project manager can discuss this with his or her management team as a concern that can be taken up with the client's relationship manager. If these issues are not really a constraint indicated in the contract signed between the client and the vendor, the access issue can easily be sorted out. Otherwise, the project manager should take such access issues into consideration and plan accordingly, so that the delay in getting the required information does not affect any of the triple constraints of the project.

Manage Stakeholder Expectations
Problem 1:

Certain meetings in the client workplace (e.g., change control board, status review meetings, or other project meetings) require that the vendor project manager is always escorted by his or her client manager or his or her peer coordinator; the project manager does not attend such meetings alone. The client manager becomes the most important stakeholder and his or her expectations have to be managed. For planned and recurrent meetings, the client manager will be informed beforehand, so escorting the project manager to such meetings is not an issue. Even though the client manager might not really be a required stakeholder for the unplanned meetings to discuss any critical issues that pop up during the day, he or she should attend them anyway. Because of the client's ways of working (in addition to the client manager's expectations that he or she should be part of all the meetings), the vendor project manager must enforce this. Such unplanned critical meetings might come to a halt if the stakeholder is unavailable at the required time and this may have adverse impacts on the project progress.

Solution 1:

Although it is a stakeholder's need or expectation, it is the vendor project manager's responsibility to negotiate and influence the stakeholder so that certain critical project meetings can still be conducted in the absence of the stakeholder because of his or her unavailability so as not to impact the project goals and progress. As long as the project manager discusses this with the client stakeholder beforehand and gets his or her consensus to conduct meetings in his or her absence, this will no longer be escalated as an issue with the vendor. The project manager should ensure keeping the client informed about the meeting's outcome, thereby managing his or her expectations.

Problem 2:

Another important expectation that a client manager as a stakeholder has is that of being the decision-making authority. So, every decision that has to be made during the project planning or execution should get his or her approval before being implemented. This may create a lot of frustration and could become a de-motivating factor for the project manager, which may also trigger numerous conflicts between the project manager and the client.

Solution 2:

The project manager should accept the fact that this is how the client works and try to adapt to such working cultures. He or she should make use of his or her management and interpersonal skills to either influence or negotiate with the client during the decision-making process so that the conflicts are resolved. He or she should also ensure that the result is always favorable for the project objectives, but not at the cost of customer dissatisfaction, because the client manager is the primary customer for the vendor. His or her satisfaction and feedback are two of the project's determining success factors; therefore, managing his or her expectations is highly important.

In conclusion, any project can be prone to an infinite number of problems, risks, and many uncertainties. It is the project manager's responsibility to run the show successfully by proactively anticipating such issues and planning how to tackle them. By being at the client's workplace, the project manager should broaden his or her planning scope to include the above communication barriers and other problems and act accordingly by implementing appropriate solutions so that the project outcome is a huge success.

About the Author

Deepa Gandhavalli Ramaniah, PMP, is working as a project manager for Cognizant Technology Solutions, Bentonville, Arkansas, USA, where she manages and coordinates payment card industry remediation efforts for the client Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. Prior to this job, she worked as project manager in Ericsson India Global Services Pvt Ltd in Chennai, India. She has over eight years of rich and varied IT experience. She is an active PMI member, volunteering as community involvement lead in the PMI Project Management Quality Community of Practice, and also as director of membership for the PMI Northwest Arkansas Chapter.