



Project Communication, from a Different Angle: Are We Asking the Right Questions?

Below is a typical list of project documents. Can you spot the one that is about communication?

- Charter
- Schedule
- Requirements
- Technical Design
- Test Plan
- Training Plan
- Implementation Plan
- Communication Plan

Yes, there it sits at the end. It is usually at best, a separate set of thinking, and at worst, an afterthought. All too often, the Communication Plan is seen as a stand-alone document. The least useful Communication Plan I've seen was

simply a list of who was to receive copies of the monthly project status report. And to think that it's a known fact that most projects that fail do so because of communication-related issues! Please tell me why, after having this knowledge for so many decades, haven't we changed our approach?

I must admit, I have seen a few communication plans that include a matrix of audiences to project communication vehicles. I've even seen a couple tied directly to a stakeholder analysis that records the stake of each entity. These actually get closer to communicating the reason a person or group is a stakeholder for each project. They offer a view of how each stakeholder needs to be involved and

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how communications can be tailored to that audience. At least these offer some improvement over most other approaches, but do they actually go far enough?

Far be it from me to go against centuries of project management thinking, but I like to think there is always room for a new view of even the old tried-and-true documents. My suggestion is to turn the direction of the document relationships around. For example, rather than say, "What should be in the Charter?" what if the first question was, "What is this project all about?"

With this question-driven approach, I can interview each of the players and stakeholders at project initialization and discern the relevant questions they have from the start.

Then, as the project progresses, I can check back in to ask, "What new questions do you have?" This, in turn, adds to my growing inventory of questions that make each new effort stronger. As I proceed to write my project documents, I am now able to ensure that the relevant questions are answered in the first draft. It is my opinion that the most useful project documents answer the reader's questions just as he/she thinks to ask them. This practice leaves the reader feeling

confident in the writer, and by extension, more confident in the project.

Let's take this approach even further, to its logical conclusion. Following are a number of additional ways to leverage your growing set of questions. Think about that *BORING* paragraph at the start of each document that is titled "Purpose," which everyone usually skips right over. What if we called that paragraph "Questions Answered in This Document," and included our bulleted list of questions? Then, at the whole project level, picture an index document on your SharePoint project site that connects questions to documents. It might start out something like this:

QUESTION	WHERE TO FIND THE ANSWER
WHAT DOES THIS PROJECT INCLUDE?	CHARTER: SCOPE
HOW IS THIS PROJECT FUNDED?	INVESTMENT PLAN
WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS ON THIS PROJECT?	CHARTER: GOVERNANCE
WHERE DO I TAKE INPUT TO THIS PROJECT?	CHANGE MANAGEMENT PLAN
WHAT TECHNOLOGY IS THIS PROJECT USING?	TECHNICAL DESIGN SPECS
AND ON....	
ETC...	

Finally, my favorite benefit of the question approach is that it helps teach an audience who is not necessarily project-savvy, which questions they *should* be asking. And, it never hurts to train our project's players to better understand the communication on their next project. 🐺

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