

Use Face Time to Be a More Effective Project Manager

Background

Project management is a very difficult profession. It is one of the few where it is normal to have more failures than successes. Worldwide, in all industries, most projects are executed late, over budget, or are abandoned before their completion (1, 2, 3). Given so many project challenges it is not surprising that it was found that the divorce rate of project managers was twice the divorce rate of the US population during the birth of the US missile and space programs (4).

Many factors have been proposed for the low project management success rates (1, 3). It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze and discuss those factors and solutions. Instead, this article analyzes one project management success factor not discussed in mainstream project management references, and in some of the most popular project management success surveys.

The 21st century saw the advent of new electronic means of communications and as a result it is very common to see most individuals in most organizations, including project managers, use emails, instant mails, text messages, and the like to communicate among themselves for professional activities.

Those modern means of communication offer great advantages in many situations, also not within the scope of this article to discuss. However, like most tools that are overused or without consideration of their effects, emails, instant mails, text messages and the rest can be misused by many individuals, including project managers.

The Problem

The widespread use of modern means of communications has resulted in most members of most projects receiving more than 100 or 200 emails, instant mails, and text messages per day. Normal individuals working under the demands of trying to do their jobs cannot promptly process so much information, and as a result fairly frequently they have to respond late to the requests made in those emails, instant mails, and text messages.

This creates unforeseen problems for project managers because their emails, instant mails, and text messages will be frequently assigned a low priority, as by definition project managers do not have any organizational authority over any team member.

The CEO, his/her direct reports, and others with organizational power can send emails and reasonably expect that most members of their organizations will promptly process the information because by definition those individuals have organizational authority over most members of those organizations. Project managers cannot make such claims because they lack organizational power over all their team members, and as a result their team members have to assign low priority or ignore most of their messages.

Through his consulting practice the author has observed project managers falling into the trap of using too many emails, instant mails, and text messages with their team members, and as a result generating preventable problems of low influencing skills due to the low priority assigned to those messages by most team members.

Use “Face Time” To Increase Your Influencing Skills

The ways to acquire power and influence over individuals that do not report to us are very complex and challenging and have been discussed by others (5, 6). So complex and challenging are the methods to influence individuals over which one does not have organizational authority that faced with such a daunting task the highly educated and capable author of one of the most widely read references on the subject chose an academic career with far less complexity over the dim prospect of climbing the corporate ladder in organizations with power structures, office politics, backstabbing, and the like (5).

Here are common project management situations where the non-discriminating use of emails, instant mails, and text messages is at best unproductive, and very often ineffective:

1. Reaching organizational consensus on project documents. Most projects will have a business case, a project charter, a project scope, and a project plan. The project manager is responsible for helping the

organization reach consensus on those documents. Conflicts are always present in the processes associated with the preparation of those documents. To send emails, instant mails, and text messages with drafts of those documents, and to try to reach internal consensus on often complex issues is inappropriate because those means will generate more conflicts, emails, and issues than the ones that are being sought to be solved.

2. Solving conflicts. All projects generate conflicts throughout their lifecycles and the project manager is responsible for solving most of those conflicts. Sending emails, instant mails, and text messages to solve project conflicts is not advised because those conflicts are very often too convoluted to be solved by those means of communications.

3. Communicating complex issues without organizational alignment on a solution. Many projects require organizations to reach internal consensus on very complex issues, which takes months of slow work from the project manager, team members, subject matter experts, the sponsor, the steering committee, and others. Sending emails, instant mails, and text messages where internal consensus do not yet exist will often unnecessarily bring more problems.

The issues created by 21st century means of communications were not addressed by two of the most popular power and influencing books (5, 6) most likely because those communication methods were not widely available when those books were written. The frequency of the problems created by emails, instant mail, and text messages warrants solutions to these modern challenges.

Face to face talking is one of the best way of communication possible because the project manager receives instant feedback on his/her message and can quickly adjust his/her message to such feedback. In addition, analytical skills, or the ability of a project manager to break a problem into little pieces and find a solution to such problem based on easier solutions to the little pieces (divide and conquer), is one of the recognized must-have skill for all project managers. It is easier to solve a complex problem by breaking it into little pieces and solving those little pieces than sending brute force, mass emails to the project team with the entire problem. Indeed

application of analytical skills is what project managers do all the time when we prepare a work breakdown structures (WBS) for projects.

As a result of those proven principles (face to face talking and analytical skills), project managers will certainly be far more successful talking face to face to team members and stakeholders in each of the three situations discussed above. I have personally managed projects where I have used extensive face to face talking and have been able to significantly decrease the amount of time that it took clients to reach internal consensus on project documents, on conflicts, and on complex issues.

Furthermore, face to face talking allows project managers to increase their influencing skills through personal relationships with team members, because those relationships are more easily established and maintained by meeting peers and getting instant feedback on our messages and finding common interests, as opposed to sending emails, instant mails, and text messages where the instant feedback is absent. It is simply far more easier to influence individuals we see face to face.

Granted, in some big or global organizations it is not feasible to talk face to face to some team members and stakeholders due to distance and time differences. Still project managers will be more effective talking over the phone to those individuals and using their analytical, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills in those conversations, than if they use emails, instant mails, and text messages, because the response times in those modern communication methods will be far more slower than the talking response times.

At a first look face to face talking appears to be a slower way to reach internal consensus, as compared to emails in which most team members are reached at the same time. It is not. Although face to face talking does take more work and more time from the project manager, it also achieves faster organizational consensus because it generates less conflicts and less resistance than the brute force, get them all approach associated with emails, and because of the slower feedback times of emails.

Conclusion

Face to face and talking to team members, stakeholders, sponsors, steering committee members, and others is a far more effective communications method than emails, instant mail, and text messages because of the significantly less feedback time, which allows the project manager to promptly adjust his/her message based on such feedback, and because of the proven superiority of analytical skills to solve complex problems, compared to the brute force means associated with mass emails.

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About the Author

Fernando Portes, MBA/MEng/MPS/PMP/CQE, is an experienced project/program manager, engineer, and educator, who has published more than ten managerial and technical publications, and who managed projects and programs for Marsh, New York University, Estee Lauder, MTV Networks, Schering-Plough, Merck, Baxter, Actavis, Mayne Pharma, Johnson & Johnson, and Wyeth. He is listed in Who is Who in Science and Engineering, in Who is Who in the US, and in Who is Who in the World. He has taught at the graduate and undergraduate levels in three universities, and was rated as one of the best project management professors at the Howe School of Stevens Institute of Technology, where he has taught graduate level project management since 2005. Portes is a member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) and of the Cornell Engineering Alumni Association (CEAA). He has MEng and MPS degrees from Cornell University and an MBA from Catholic University (Santo Domingo). He speaks Spanish and French and can be reached at portes@bestpjm.com.