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# Communication, dialogue and project management

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788

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Project communication is overwhelmingly viewed as the proper and timely delivery of pertinent project information. The view of communication in this way misses the constitutive nature of communication. Communication is more than message exchange but a way that project managers generate the grounds for a project. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the communicative practices of project managers creates a dialogue with stakeholders that ultimately impacts the content, direction and outcome of a project.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Semi-structured interviews were performed with project managers from the Project Management Office of a large international bank. The project managers were responsible for their own projects of varying size with scopes that included everything from marketing initiatives to heavily oriented technology projects.

**Findings** – Overall, the project managers interviewed for the current project do not subscribe to the belief that communication is part of a constitutive dialogue. Instead, when discussing their overall views of communication, 82 percent of the interviewees took a transmission approach to the action. To that end, they believe that the goal of communication is to send clear, unambiguous and complete information.

**Originality/value** – Unlike other studies about communication within the field of project management, the current study looks to uncover how communication is part of a constitutive dialogue between a project manager and project stakeholders. The researchers did not look just to understand the micro-level exchanges between project managers and stakeholders but how those exchanges enabled a sustained dialogue that shapes the scope and trajectory of a project.

**Keywords** Project management, Conversation, Communication, Dialogue

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Project management is the process within organization where temporary endeavors are undertaken for beneficial change and added value (Nokes, 2007). Project management is also a professional practice of managerial knowledge (Hodgson, 2002) that requires a multi-dimensional set of abilities and skills (Kerzner, 2001/2009). Like other professions, project management is based on institutionalized performance rules and occupational member rights (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The institutionalization of these rules and rights emerges from the vast amount of practice-specific popular and academic literature, professional associations and educational institutions that focus on project management. To that end, there has been an abundant amount of investigation and discussion on the role of communication relative to project teams and project managers. However, much of this research focusses on the instrumental aspects of communication and not the way that it is used to develop and bring to end projects.

Two senses of communication emerge from the literature. First, communication is viewed as a competency that project managers require to be effective (Brill *et al.*, 2006).



The second is that communication is a factor for success and naturally, also the factor that leads to failure of projects and project management (Söderlund, 2011). In both senses, communication is overwhelmingly viewed as “the provision of an appropriate network and necessary data to all key actors in the project implementation” (Slevin and Pinto, 1987, p. 34). Both of these senses presuppose that communication is not just about information exchange but constitutive of the direction and outcome of projects. In other words, what is missing is a deeper focus on how communication is used to create, re-create and change projects. The purpose of the current study is to focus on this missing piece and explore how the communicative practices of project managers organize projects. To do this, the study draws from the constitutive view of organizational communication (Taylor and Cooren, 1997; Taylor *et al.*, 2001) in general, and in particular, from theories of communication design (Aakhus, 2007; Aakhus and Jackson, 2005; Shön and Rein, 1994). Equipped with a firm understanding of how communication creates projects, project managers will be armed with yet another form of project control.

## Literature

### *Communication as a skill*

Project management was popularized by the Department of Defense 40 years ago (Kerzner, 2001/2009) to establish guidelines around short-term assignments and ventures. Almost immediately researchers began to investigate the “soft,” or people, side of project management (Hodgetts, 1968), which they believed was in stark contrast to more stringent aspects such as creating scope, budgets and timelines. In one of the first extensive studies of the people side of projects, Thamhain and Gemmill (1974) found that one of the most important skills needed by a project manager was the ability to communicate efficiently. More specifically, they concluded that a project manager’s capacity to influence team members was consistent with their effectiveness. This early study started an important discussion – one that centered on communication as a means for project managers to navigate the technological and business domains of each project (Haywood, 1998). From this point on, there has been a great deal of research on the communication methods of project managers as they attempt to end temporary endeavors on budget, in time and within scope.

Slevin and Pinto (1987) lump communication with other human, technical and financial resources such as personnel, technical tasks, client acceptance, monitor and feedback and trouble shooting. Using case studies, they show that communication is a method used to achieve the calculated and deliberate ends of a project. As they explain, project managers need to be both tactician and strategist in the way they use communication to balance the interplay between planning and action. More specifically, project managers must be adept at providing the “appropriate network and necessary data to all key actors in the project implementation” (p. 34). Continuing with the use of case studies as data, Sotiriou and Wittmer (2001) used four research studies to look at the perception of influence methods of project managers. What emerged from the studies is that project manager’s most important communication competency was the ability to influence through persuasion and negotiation. The upshot here is that the findings echo what Thamhain and Gemmill (1974) stated years earlier about project managers – communication is a skill that provides project managers with the footing to influence the tasks and conditions of the project.

Henderson (2004, 2008) conducted two of the more widely cited project management communication studies. First, in an exploratory study, Henderson (2004) investigated

project managers' competency in encoding and decoding communication as they related to satisfaction and productivity. She collected data from cross-functional project team members from a variety of industries during nationwide project management workshops. The results indicated that there is a relationship between communication and performance – high competency in encoding and decoding relates to team member satisfaction and encoding is significantly associated with productivity. In a follow up study, Henderson (2008) wanted to explore the behavioral aspects of project managers' communication competency, especially as they relate to crucial outcomes in virtual environments. She used mixed method research with respondents from the Chief Project Officer web site to determine competency in encoding and decoding communication. Again she found that project managers' competencies in transmitting information significantly contribute to team member satisfaction and productivity.

Skulmoski and Hartman (2010) investigated the soft competencies by project phase that information systems (IS) project managers require for project success. The authors conducted qualitative interviews to collect data from a sample of IS project managers and business leaders. The authors identified the key competencies for each of the IS project phases (initiation, planning, implementation and closeout). The competencies were sorted into categories including communication (e.g. effective questioning). Their results stated that participants believed that open communication is the most important communication competencies during initiation which includes effective questioning, generating feedback and listening skills.

The fundamental theme of the research is that communication is a competency that project managers can develop in order to succeed. However, most project management education either overlooks "soft" skills (i.e. communication) or teaches them separately from project management administration skills (i.e. budgeting, scope definition or creating the work breakdown structure (WBS)) (Brill *et al.*, 2006). Accordingly, researchers have called for the development of educational programs geared toward training project managers in the necessary competencies including message development, negotiation and conflict resolution (Brill *et al.*, 2006; see also Alam *et al.*, 2010). The assumption here is that increased training and education in communication will enhance the ability for project managers to implement project management work (Anderson, 2012).

#### *Communication as a factor*

The second area of project communication focusses on the relationship between communication (i.e. data and information flow) and progress (Badir *et al.*, 2003). Here communication is looked at as a factor in the success or failure of projects and project management (Söderlund, 2011). Katz's (1982) seminal study about the longevity of research and development (R&D) project groups brought attention to this research trajectory. While looking to conceptualize temporal frameworks for changes that occur in project teams, Katz found that poor communication impacts team performance negatively. And because Katz discussed variations in communication activities, folded into this trajectory are investigations into the strategies and instruments used for project communication such as such as reports, dashboards, meetings and presentations (Gibson and Cohen, 2003; Henderson and Stackman, 2010).

The bulk of the research in this area is within the context of R&D. Pinto and Pinto (1990) found that high-cooperation teams differed from low-cooperation teams both in terms of their increased use of informal methods for communication as well as their reasons for communicating. Griffin and Hauser (1992) observed that successful project teams highly adept at coordination and communication were able to overcome the

problems associated with physical facilities, personnel movement and organizational structures. And Hauptman and Hirji (1996) discovered that two-way communication, and the willingness to share ambiguous information, had a positive impact on cross-national project outcomes. The result of the work done with R&D project teams is conclusive in this regard: it demonstrates that the amount of communication among team members is a strong predictor of project outcomes.

Beyond R&D, Hoegl and Gemuenden's (2001) looked at the communication among software teams and explained that there is a positive relationship between informal communication (i.e. formalization structure and openness of information exchange) and team performance. Ammeter and Dukerich (2002) also looked at communication in technical environments and their survey of engineering and construction project teams overwhelmingly concluded that the regularity with which meetings were held impacted how well a team accomplished its goals. And while looking at more general project management teams, Chiochio (2007) and Chiochio *et al.* (2012) found that high-performing teams exchanged more messages. Indeed Chiochio *et al.* studied several different general project teams and discovered that increased communication frequency was predicative of team task performance. These studies echo the same basic premise about communication as those that focussed on the context of R&D – that it is vital to project success. Indeed Hoegl and Gemuenden explained it best when they stated that communication is the most elementary component of team work.

The final aspect of this research trajectory has to do with the strategies and tools used to support communication between the project team. Tools are instruments for communication through which certain sorts of communication are enabled (Aakhus and Ziek, 2009) and strategies are broad-based statements that enable managers to accomplish objectives (Smulowitz and Ziek, 2012). There are a great many tools and strategies for project communication (i.e. telephone, faxes, teleconferences, dashboard, e-mail, videoconferences, collaborative design tools, face-to-face and knowledge management systems) and the research states that, in general, the more tools used by project managers the more successful a project team will be. So although there is a difference on the tools used by certain types of teams, tools enable the conditions for success (Gibson and Cohen, 2003). For example, Henderson and Stackman (2010) studied project communication to determine what degree the teams relied on mediated communications rather than face-to-face interaction to accomplish tasks. According to Henderson and Stackman (2010), project teams working on projects of \$1 million or less tend to be co-located and more reliant on face-to-face communication. Obviously then project teams with budgets above \$1 million have higher dispersion among members and are more likely to use mediated technology.

The underlying approach of the research on communication as a factor has to do with the perception that improving communication will positively impact project team performance. As Chiochio (2007) explains, projects are complex, high-stakes and time bound ventures fraught with uncertainty and project managers must develop fruitful communication among project stakeholders. Therefore project managers need to spend just as much time working on increasing the frequency and types of communication as they would developing software, models, simulations and databases (White and Fortune, 2002). So just like project manager communication competency, communication as a general area of project team behavior is something that also needs to be developed.

A common theme in the research on communication as either a competency (Brill *et al.*, 2006) or factor (Söderlund, 2011) is that it is a process of moving information

to project stakeholders as outlined in project plans as well as various ad hoc requests (Pinto and Pinto, 1990; Richardson, 2010). There is an emphasis on networks and necessary data (Slevin and Pinto, 1987), transmission of information (Henderson, 2008) and the amount of information that moves among team members (Pinto and Pinto, 1990; Griffen and Hauser, 1996; Hauptman and Hirji, 1996). What best describes this approach is Dow and Taylor's (2008) description of the three major components of project management communication: communicating in a timely manner, generating the right information and collecting, distributing and storing information. While understanding the process of accumulating and transmitting data is important, there needs to be more of a shift from the emphasis on data management to social interaction. Communication is about how projects are created, directions decided and outcomes determined. In other words, communication constitutes the dialogue between project managers and project stakeholders that ultimately shapes the scope of projects (Söderlund, 2004; Winter *et al.*, 2006).

What is needed at this point are more studies that look at communication as a social process and not simply the instrumental process of information delivery (Winter *et al.*, 2006). There needs to be a shift to an empirical social research perspective so that we can capture the unique, complex and time-limited processes of interaction and project management (Söderlund, 2004). The current study does just this by exploring the communicative practices of project managers and more specifically the underlying premise that these practices are part of the constitutive dialogue that occurs between a project manager and project stakeholders. The premise echoes Söderlund's (2004, 2011) belief that project managers should look toward concepts and images which focus on social interaction among people: the flux of events and human action, the framing of projects (and the profession) within an array of social agenda, practices and stakeholder relations. To that end, the current study asks the following research question:

*RQ1.* How do project managers use communication to shape a project?

#### *Communication design*

The journey to answering the question starts first with attending to approaches that direct attention to the role of communication as constitutive of organization. This line of thinking emanates from the notion that organization is a discursive phenomenon that is constructed and expressed through communication (Taylor and Cooren, 1997). The generative aspect of communication emerges from the way organizational members speak about decisions, plans and activities and impacts the entirety of the organization's reality (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). In general, as it relates to project management, communication is one of the most important organizing properties. To explore the role of communication as constitutive of projects, the current paper will draw specifically from the theoretical insights of communication design, which is an expression of the constitutive approach to communication.

Communication design takes the demands of interaction as a central animating force in shaping the built-up human environment. According to Aakhus (2007) and Aakhus and Jackson (2005) there are three interrelated starting points to understanding communication design. First, communication design is a natural activity evident in language use and the ability to utilize mutual knowledge for the purposes of communication (e.g. Jacobs, 1994). Second, the built-up human environment reveals both designs for communication and communication design work. Design is an open-ended process where individual socio-technical and cognitive efforts yields

interaction. And finally, artificial environments from this perspective can be studied to advance knowledge about communication because it examines how communication is enacted and institutionalized in society.

The design stance emphasizes how parties mutually construct and elaborate the communicative context through the actions they take and how that context shapes the next possible actions. Typically studies of communication as design investigate interventions into and inventions for human interaction that aim to change interaction from one form into another such as a quarrel into a negotiation. These include studies of dispute mediators, meeting facilitators, policy professionals, and the design and use of information and communication technology (Aakhus, 2007; Aakhus and Jackson, 2005). Yet recently there has been a turn to apply design to managerial and professional practices because it explains the construction of forms of preferred forms of communication and interaction (Ziek, 2008, 2013). For example, Anderson and Aakhus (2012) found that association managers rely on communication design in their daily lives. As they explain, association managers develop communication that underwrites their interventions on interactions among association executives that they come in contact with. The design perspective then draws out an important point in project communication – it shapes the dialogue with stakeholders and consequently the activity and boundaries of each project.

### Methodology

The point of the current study is to explore the deeper meaning associated with a project manager's communication. However, because the constitutive nature of communication is often overlooked in business communication, there are no principal methods that enable researchers to uncover how communication is part of a larger dialogue that shapes organizational activity. In an attempt to overcome this problem, interviews with project managers were transcribed and analyzed using grounded practical theory to develop a descriptive framework. Grounded practical theory is a form of interpretive discourse analysis that aims to yield insight into the communication problems experienced with practitioners, the techniques they use to cope with those problems, and the "situated ideals" that they employ in normative reflection on their practice (Craig and Tracy, 1995).

In total, there were 11 semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included five touring questions and resulted in a mean length of 25 minutes. All of the participating project managers worked in the Project Management Office (PMO) of a large international bank. The project managers were responsible for their own projects of varying size with scopes that included everything from marketing initiatives to heavily oriented technology projects. The mean number of years of experience for the project managers is 10.8. In total, 54 percent of those interviewed hold a PMP certificate, which is the highest industry-recognized certificate. However, all of the project managers have undergone some type of project management training. In summary the participants in the study were experienced, trained and highly practiced at the concepts and skills of project management.

Touring questions:

- (1) Describe the work you do.
- (2) Describe the roles you perform as a PM.
- (3) What is something a PM should never do?

- (4) What is the key to being a successful communicator?
- (5) How would you define success in your role?

Grounded practical theory allows the understanding of communication practices to emerge from the data instead of using the data to test a theory or hypothesis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As Craig and Tracy (2014) explain, grounded practical theory compliments the study of communication as design because the approach focusses on describing practices where communication is central to what people are doing. The process is undertaken at three distinct but interrelated levels: problem, technical and philosophical (Craig and Tracy, 1995). The problem level identifies complex interactional dilemmas that arise within communicative stations; the technical-specific techniques by which participants attempt to cope with that dilemma; and the philosophical level allows for reflecting on the normative basis of a participants actions (Craig and Tracy, 1995).

More specific to the current study is that grounded practical theory enabled the researchers to search for empirically grounded meanings within the interactions between project managers and project stakeholders. In other words, grounded practical theory provides an opportunity to describe the communicative practices of project managers by cultivating data from interviews about their actual communicative practices. After the interviews were transcribed, the data was reconstructed so that an understanding of the three levels of analysis could emerge. The data revealed the practical aspects of project management communication such as the natural grounds of communication, the types of communicative moves used and the instruments employed during communication with project stakeholders. What also emerged was an understanding of each project manager's personal definition of communication, what they found difficult about communication, what they felt defined effective communication and how they used communication during interactions with project stakeholders. To this end, the knowledge gained through grounded practical theory was actively constructed with the meaning relative to the experiential world of project managers.

## Results

Unlike other studies about communication within the field of project management, the current study looks to uncover how communication is part of a constitutive dialogue between project stakeholders. Moreover how this dialogue contributes to the scope and trajectory of a project. Therefore extracted from the interviews is the way that project managers shape their projects through stakeholder relations. The researchers did not look just to understand the micro-level exchanges between project managers and stakeholders but how those exchanges enabled sustained dialogue. This follows Alin *et al.* (2011) approach of focussing on the role of speech acts (utterances such as statements, questions, commands, greetings, etc.) in knowledge creation and exchange during projects (see also Austin, 1962; Searle, 1965).

### *Problem-level analysis*

The problem level looks at the puzzles or dilemmas faced by the participants in the communicative work (Craig and Tracy, 1995). Reflected in this level of analysis is the web of interrelated problems that project managers face while communicating and interacting with project stakeholders. Generally, the data revealed that project managers are not cognizant of the constitutive nature of communication. Project managers do not take into consideration that they are indeed designers nor that



they are co-creators of a dialogue that ultimately crafts the trajectory of a project. The interviewees echoed the same premise found in the project management literature. For example, interviewees consider communication as a key skill (Thamhain and Gemmill, 1974) in their practice and an elementary component of team work (Hoegl and Gemuenden, 2001). This was seen in the following exchanges. When asked what skills define a good project manager answers included “communication skills” (9.25.12a) and “largely communication skills” (9.25.12b). More to the point is when the interviewer pushed to determine the impediments faced in their role the project manager’s stated “communication breaks” (9.25.12b) and “some of the biggest challenges that we have would be around communication” (2.15.13B). Expanding up on how to overcome impediments, one project manager explained:

[...] stop communication. To us communication is key, whether it is to us, or it is upward to the leadership or it is communication downward to the cross functional team, but you should never go silent (2.14.13).

### *Technical-level analysis*

Reflected in this level of analysis is the reconstruction of the context that project managers are situated in and the strategies and instruments used to manage the context. To cope with the problem or dilemma, project managers rely heavily on the transmission model of communication. The transmission approach to communication is the most common in American culture and it is defined by the idea that the goal is to create messages that impart clear and concise information. When discussing their overall views of communication, 82 percent of the interviewees took a transmission approach to the action. This was not surprising in light of how the project management literature emphasizes data and networks (Slevin and Pinto, 1987), transmitting information (Henderson, 2008), and quantity of information (Pinto and Pinto, 1990; Griffin and Hauser, 1992; Hauptman and Hirji, 1996). To be sure, the interviewees echoed the transmission model of communication in myriad ways. Transmission emerged in surface statements where communication was explained as a way to “keep everybody on the same page” (9.16.12) or a way of “being able to give everyone the right amount of information” (1.13.13). But the notion of communication as linear (i.e. Shannon and Weaver, 1949) is best seen in the following accounts:

“We make sure that we capture the discussion point on the calls and the takeaways and all of those things. Those get communicated out and on every call and ask for validation – so did we capture this right? Are there any omissions? Are there any errors?” (9.25.12a) and “Some of the biggest challenges that we have would be around communication and just knowing when to communicate, who [sic] to communicate to, and why” (2.15.13b).

There should be no surprise that transmission approach is the dominant view of communication with this group of project managers. Project management training relies mostly on the Project Management Book of Knowledge (2013) which explains that communication is the timely and appropriate exchange of information. So although a project manager communicates in many ways, the point here is that they believe that the sender is responsible for making the information clear, unambiguous and complete so that the receiver can receive it correctly (Project Management Institute, 2013). In other words, respondents believed that more and faster communication equals better transmission and thus better control over a project and project stakeholders. Indeed, when asked what a project manager should never do when communicating the interviewee answers included: “should never falsely report on the status” (9.06.12),

“I don’t think you should take too many conversations off line” (9.06.12), “probably, hide the truth of what is actually happening” (1.31.13), “you have to be realistic in your goals and objectives” (9.04.12) and “making uneducated assumptions on something that is not supported by the data or previous information” (2.11.13). These quotes affirm that project managers understand communication as something they control to accomplish projects and constrain stakeholders.

Not surprisingly a commitment to a transmission view of communication inures project managers to a specific view of what constitutes good communication. If communication is packaging and sending data, then good communication is doing that well. This can be seen with the statement: “good communication is people that respond back to you when you email them” (9.4.12) or “good communication is if I send out an update and I get relevant questions, then I think I communicate effectively” (1.31.13).

An important aspect of the transmission view of communication is the development of strategies and tools that work to constrain interaction. Here escalation is a strategy that project managers use to regulate the flow of communication. Escalation is when a project manager ascends the corporate ladder to guarantee the cooperation of a stakeholder that they believe is necessary to complete objectives and goals. Escalation is a general tactic for controlling communication because it is enacted based on the project manager’s perception of the project and stakeholder. In other words, escalation is not enacted by every project manager, in every situation. As a PMP with six years of experienced explained:

I believe in being transparent. If I cannot get to that common ground with them one-on-one I kind of let them know that I am going to escalate it. So, it is not like I am going behind their back (2.11.13).

In much the same way, interviewees described their effort to develop project management communication tools. The creation of specific activities, channels and events aid the project manager in the fulfilling the necessary communication steps relative to the project including planning, distribution, reporting and closure (Project Management Institute, 2013). As a project manager with only two years experience explained that communication:

[...] is always circling back to make sure that stakeholders validate and from there produce various dashboard reports that we supple to our core team. The more senior people of the functional areas whom are associated with the project so ensuring that we are capturing some of the milestones so that the next step everyone is aware that this has been accomplished so far, this is what is coming up (9.24.12A).

### *Philosophical-level analysis*

The third level is concerned with the philosophical and seeks to articulate the situated ideals that practitioners use to work out the problems associated with communicative work (Craig and Tracy, 1995). The recourse for reflecting on the normative basis leads us to the remaining 18 percent of the interviews, which described a hybrid model of communication. The reason for focussing on the behavior of these project managers is because the philosophical level of analysis allows for normative critiques and discussions. To do this tough requires situating project management communication within the local and general contexts. In other words, to build any understanding of the normative standards means investigating all views of project management communication. Project managers here explained that communication is “being a

good listener as much as being able to express yourself” (9.25.12A) or stating that during communication “you have to actively listening” (9.06.12). So even though these project managers emphasized the needs of the audience, they still relied mostly on instrumental aspects of communication. In other words, much like the dominant group, their focus was on conveying information; softer skills such as listening were more of a tool for enhancing how they exchanged information.

Overall the project managers interviewed for the current project do not subscribe to the belief that communication is part of a dialogue that is a constitutive aspect of a project. Instead, they view communication as a process of flooding stakeholders with data (Kliem, 2008). However, project management communication is a dynamic, never-ending, subjective process (Haywood, 1998; Kliem, 2008) that creates and maintains the course of a project. The technical aspects of a project such as the definition of scope, CPM charts, budget, the creation of dashboards, etc., are all really negotiated through dialogue. The way that the literature describes communication as a necessary skill for project managers and a factor for successful projects points to the notion that communication dictates the trajectory of a project.

## Discussion

### *Metaphors*

The first implication of the study is theoretical and revolves around metaphors of communication. The most legitimate form of project communication centers on transmission and thus puts the burden on the project manager. Carey (1989) conceptualizes the transmission model of communication on transportation and envisions messages as freight being distributed across space and time. His basic metaphor is geographical and communication is conceived of in terms of imparting, sending and receiving. Carey describes the transmission logic of communication as the most prevalent type of communication in American culture. So, it is not surprising to see it deeply embedded in a US-based PMO. Interestingly, he specifies consequences of the transmission model as scientific language, a distancing of the purveyor of words and the recipient, and the control of the flow of information. The transmission model assumes that the hearer decodes or interprets messages using the same encoding/decoding system as that employed by the one originating the messages (Krippendorff, 1993).

The presumption in the transmission model that messages have a common interpretation across receivers is restrictive. Commitment to a transmission commits a practitioner to data collection and organization, sending the information to all appropriate stakeholders, with the intent of presenting a comprehensive, coherent message understood by all. The transmission model recognizes breakdowns in communication, but its solution to breakdowns is more, better communication. The burden to communicate the right stuff at the right time to the right people in the right way sits squarely on the shoulders of the one responsible for collection and transmission: in this case, the project manager.

What happens when things are not understood as intended? One interviewee 9.25.12B said that she experienced difficulties when she had “communication breaks.” When queried about what constitutes a “communication break,” she responded that one team member interprets information one way and another team member another way. This raises a question of interpretation and common meanings. How does a transmission model orientation handle this type of issue? She went on to say that “clarity is repetition.” There is a clear entailment of the transmission model that

meaning can be achieved through more, better communication. Another interviewee sheds additional light on this problem: “you need to ask a lot of questions, to be clear, never assume that people know what you are talking about [...] Explain it in detail” (9.6.12). This introduces the idea that a coherent, consistent meaning is not automatically achieved simply through transmitting information. The transmission model leads to persistent efforts to craft the right message so that all “hear” what is being “said” and yet all who have managed know that misunderstanding is not an abnormal outcome.

#### *Constitutive control*

The second implication is practical. By accepting the alternative to the transmission model, project managers can develop a form of constitutive control. In other words, focussing on designing social processes will enhance a project manager’s ability to influence and frame a project. According to Gardiner and Stewart (2000), control is often a misunderstood aspect of project management. Control involves analyzing a situation, deciding on what to do and actually doing. Largely, project managers work to control the complex and diverse activities of a project through cost, time and quality (Atkinson, 1999). More specifically, project managers use a variety of tools, often monitoring tools, to control projects such as budgets, timelines, Gantt charts, scope definition, etc. They also create the WBS, which is the assignment of different tasks to different people (Packendorff, 1995) in an attempt to manage project stakeholders. Yet what emerges from the current study is that communication can also be used as a control mechanism. Communication is one of the important ways that project managers can further regulate the scope of a project and the behavior of project stakeholders.

Adopting a constitutive understanding provides project manager’s with a tool to resolve some of the conundrums they face in managing cross-functional, geographically dispersed teams. The constitutive view moves beyond a transmission view of communication to one where the participants jointly construct meaning. The emphasis of this perspective is not on messaging, but on meaning making. This shift alters what counts as a communication problem and guides the (re)solution along differing dimensions than a “more, better” model. Solutions or decisions are not proclaimed *ex cathedra*, but are constructed through the interaction of the various stakeholders. This is not to say that there is not individual agency and responsibility. It does not simply deliver. The principles that stem from this orientation are present in the interviews as a minority report in such phrases as “being a good listener” (9.251.12a) and “you have to actively [to be] actively listening [and] you always have to ask questions when you are not sure” (9.6.12).

The generative aspect of communication emerges from the way organizational members speak about decisions, plans and activities and impacts the entirety of the organization’s reality (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). Therefore communication is a means of creation that thus shapes the not only the scope of a project but also the trajectory. A project is just as much about technical requirements as it is about communication. Indeed the technical requirements are determined through the communication that occurs between the project manager and the project stakeholders. Communication then gives project managers another form of control – another tool to design the predetermined goals, activities and resources of a project. This enhanced understanding of project communication is not about information and paperwork but about the management of the dialogue relative to projects. It is focus on re-imagining project manager

communication as the ability to create communication moment-by-moment that delivers preferred situational results (Ziek, 2014) that ultimately enhances the trajectory and completion of a project.

*Limitations*

There are two major limitations to the current study. The first limitation has to do with the size of the data. With only 11 interviews, questions regarding reliability or an “objective of consistency” (Creswell, 2003) can be made. This limitation is balanced by the fact that they study is expletory and consequently used was qualitative means. As Krathwohl (1998) states, “qualitative procedures are ideal for complex phenomena about which there is little certain knowledge” (p. 229) and the constitutive nature of project management communication is certainly a phenomena that has garnered little attention. The second limitation is that the entirety of interactions were not collected and analyzed. Dialogue is a phenomenological model of communication and by only using the project manager’s descriptions of communication, there is the chance that certain elements of communication and interaction were missed. This limitation is balanced by the fact that often project management is an environment in which the necessary amount of information is coded in the written or verbal messages (Bredillet *et al.*, 2010) which is what was captured during the interviews.

**Conclusion**

As the management-by-project approach to operations becomes more popular, project managers are becoming a staple in today’s organizational world (Bredillet *et al.*, 2010). With the increased role of project managers, there also needs to be a constant reevaluation of the ideas and concepts behind the process of project managers. One of the things that needs to be reconsidered, particularly with the heightened use of computer-mediated communication, is how and why project managers communicate. Typically, communication is viewed as either a competency that project managers require to be effective (Brill *et al.*, 2006) or a factor for success and naturally, also the factor that leads to failure of projects and project management (Söderlund, 2011). Both views are founded on a transmission view of communication. However, here we see that communication is really constitutive of the trajectory of a project. Understanding this provides project managers with additional means of project control beyond budgets and timelines (Tables I).

Interviewee	Location	Title	PMP certification	Experience
8.30.12	Northeast	Program Director	Yes	21
9.04.12	Northeast	Project Manager	Yes	18
9.06.12	Northeast	Project Specialist	No	2
9.25.12A	Northeast	Project Manager	No	1
9.25.12B	Northeast	Project Manager	No	8
10.9.12	Northeast	Project Manager	No	25
1.31.13	Midwest	Sr. Mgr. of Programs	Yes	12
2.11.13	Midwest	Program Manager	Yes	10
2.14.13	Midwest	Program Manager	No	2
2.15.13A	Midwest	Sr. Mgr. of Programs	Yes	4.5
2.15.13B	Midwest	Program Manager	Yes	15

**Table I.**  
Interview  
information

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