



**PARTNERING
POINT**

The Root Causes of Poor Project Communication

Over the course of ten years, 134 project teams were asked “from your experience, what is it that makes a project succeed?”

Over 95% of team members said that *good communication* was the reason for their success and *poor communication* was the reason for their failures. Thus, indicating that communication appears to be the key to project team success.

After working with over 2,000 different construction teams we began to identify that, what the teams recognized as a “communication issue” was actually a symptom and not the root cause of their problem. We also concluded, that a team that works diligently to improve “communication cannot make significant improvement until and unless they work to overcome the true root cause of the problem.

From working with these construction teams, patterns emerged into **seven root causes of poor project communication.**

ROOT CAUSES OF POOR COMMUNICATION			
#1	Fear	#4	Loss of Momentum
#2	Misaligned Expectations	#5	Dissatisfaction
#3	Confusion	#6	Lack of Commitment
#7	Unconscious Incompetence		

Root Cause #1: Fear

Fear makes team members feel the need to protect their own interests. When we feel the need to protect, we certainly are not going to be open, therefore communication is going to be stifled. Worse yet, our communication is likely to be an argument about why we are right and others are wrong. Letter writing on positions and an inability to solve even simple problems is the result.

Root Cause #2: Misaligned Expectations

When the team members each have a different expectation on how things are

WHAT MAKES PROJECTS SUCCEED; FAIL?	
134 Project Teams were asked:	
1	Think of your best project ever - what made it so good?
2	Think of your worst project ever - what made it so bad?
The Results	
1	For Successful Projects: 95.5% of teams said Communication
2	For Failed Projects: 98% of teams said Communication

“supposed to” work you have misaligned expectations. Most often it is over roles, responsibilities and authority. With misaligned expectations, no matter how hard each side tries, they just can’t seem to get together. The team may be “communicating” but understanding is not happening.

Root Cause #3: Confusion

Where there is confusion, chaos will break out. Again, this can be over roles and responsibilities, or over processes. When people aren’t sure what they are supposed to do, not only does the team lose productivity, there is chaos and people move around trying to figure out how things

are supposed to work. This is true at all levels of the project. If a decision is made but no one understands how it is supposed to be implemented, then you will end up with different people implementing different solutions – leading to chaos and what appears to be poor communication.

Root Cause #4: Loss of Momentum

When everyone on the team is not in the boat, facing the same direction, and rowing toward project success; the project loses momentum. The more frustration

there is, the more loss of momentum you will have. Frustration is caused when the team goes forward but keeps getting pulled back. Soon the project is behind schedule and communication switches to finger pointing, causing even more loss of momentum.

Root Cause #5: Dissatisfaction

Research shows that when project teams look forward to going to their jobs (the level of job satisfaction is high) the project is highly likely to be on time and on budget. When the project teams “dread” going to work, the project is in deep trouble.

When a project is not fun to be on, a sense of dread appears, and communication between project team members is strained at best.

Root Cause #6: Lack of Commitment

When people aren’t really committed to the success of your project you have “slack.” This is like slack in a rope. You don’t have a strong team focused on what it will take to succeed. Inadequate resources can also cause “slack.” The project team loses faith that they can achieve the project goals. Lack of communication is usually the result.

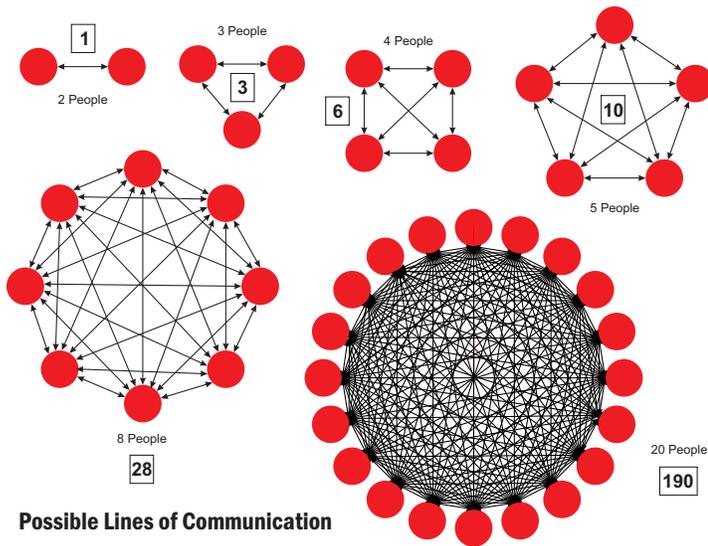
Root Cause #7: Unconscious Incompetence

Inexperienced staff can face a very steep learning curve. Even one inexperienced person in a key role can cause havoc on your project. They just don’t know what they don’t know, so they focus on what is available to them; the specifications, contract, and drawings. They must learn how to resolve specific project issues as they occur. Often, documentation becomes the focus instead of problem solving.

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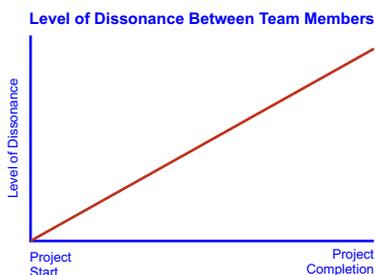
How the Root Causes Play Out on Projects

These root causes grow in impact with the size and complexity of a project. The ability to communicate gets more and more difficult as people get involved in the project. When we have two people, there is one line of communication; three lines with three people, six lines with four people and almost two hundred lines of communication with twenty people. So the root causes are more and more significant as your project size grows.



Possible Lines of Communication

There is a snowballing effect once the root causes begin to create dissonance on a project. What might start out as a small issue, over time will grow into an overwhelming inability to deal with issues in a meaningful way. Over the life of the project, the level of dissonance will continue to grow.



While these root causes can and do show up on any project, the different delivery methods have some specific risks to having the root causes play out of their projects.

Design-Bid-Build Low bid projects are often plagued by fear. Fear mostly surrounds dealing with changes that happen because the designer can't design a perfect set of documents and the contractor must bid as if everything is perfect. This fear also plays out in loss of momentum, and dissatisfaction when the team feels they can't stop the madness of rehashing the same issues over and over to no avail.

CMGC-CMR CMGC and CMR projects can have misaligned expectations around roles and responsibilities. This is because people may be new to the method and each CMGC and CMR is unique in how it plays out. So, people come to the project with

preconceived beliefs on their roles and responsibilities. Often these beliefs are not in alignment. This conflict plays out without the team even realizing it, because they know what they are "supposed to do." You may also see confusion and fear grow as the dissonance grows in power over the life of the project.

Design/Build There are many "flavors" of design build and it also can be plagued with the same kind of root causes as experienced on CMGC/CMR. There is a unique challenge for Design Build when the designers are pitted against one another to protect their designs (bridging documents vs being designer of record), while at the same time charged to integrate them into one cohesive and buildable set. This leads to confusion, loss of momentum and a lack of commitment when the team feels they can't achieve what is needed to succeed.

IPD – Progressive Design/Build IPD and Progressive Design Build both require collaboration to work. So, teams that don't understand this and bring adversarial approaches don't realize their unconscious incompetence is creating their inability to succeed. You will see confusion and dissatisfaction grow as the expectation that this delivery method is supposed to provide better results is not met.

P3 Public Private Partnerships are challenged with a multi-headed owner and too often focus on shifting risk through the "contract". This leads to a lack of commitment to helping the project succeed. The Design/Builder and Operator are left to try and figure out how to make things work sometimes in an impossible scenario. This leads to fear, dissatisfaction, and loss of momentum.

Rooting Out the Root Causes on Your Project

Any project can grow in its ability to have open, honest communication. You can't resolve what you don't see or understand. A structured Collaborative Partnering process is designed to develop a high trust atmosphere that allows for these root causes to come to light and be dealt with, so the team can grow in momentum and innovation.

Advancing the Art and Science of Collaboration

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