



# Channeling Project Success

by David Elam

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Proper project planning involves communication planning to ensure that communications among project stakeholders are complete, effective, and appropriate. The Project Management Institute defines a stakeholder as “a person or organization who is actively involved in the project or whose interests may be positively or negatively affected by the performance of the project.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, communication planning must encompass communication channels that the project manager does not always control.

Figure 1 illustrates how communication channels grow geometrically with increasing stakeholders. A simple project with five stakeholders yields 10 communication channels. When we double the stakeholders to 10, we have 45 potential communication channels! A communication plan can help us reduce the number of active communication channels and manage communications along those channels.

Of course, communication planning requirements vary with project complexity and the number of project stakeholders. For some projects, the project communication plan can be discerned from organizational charts and policies, purchase orders or contracts, and deliverables schedules. For these projects, little is required in the way of a written communication plan because there are few stakeholders and their communication interactions are defined by organizational systems that are in place to support project delivery.

As an example, consider a wastewater sampling and analytical project for which a staff scientist at a manufacturing facility, reporting to the facility environment, health, and safety (EH&S) manager, serves as the project manager. For this project, the project manager will likely communicate directly with the laboratory regarding sample container delivery, submittal of samples, and results reporting. The project manager will compile the results for reporting, which will be transmitted to the regulatory agency by the facility EH&S manager. In this example, four project stakeholders—the staff scientist/project manager, EH&S manager, lab representative, and agency representative—yield six communication channels; however, organizational structure and practices result in only three active communication channels (project manager and lab,

project manager and EH&S manager, EH&S manager and regulatory agency). Communications between the project manager and regulatory agency, the EH&S manager and the lab, and the lab and regulatory agency are eliminated by organizational structure and policy and purchase order terms.

Communication channels can grow quickly for a large, complex project or a simple project involving multiple participants. Consider an air permitting project in which our same staff scientist/project manager retains a consulting firm for permit support. In addition to the project manager and EH&S manager, this project could include stakeholders from production departments, a project manager and multiple technical personnel from the consulting firm, multiple personnel from the local regulatory agency, additional personnel from the state agency and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and representatives from citizen groups. As a result, this project might include 15 stakeholders, yielding 105 communication channels. While the two project managers may not be able to define and control the communications over all channels (e.g., neither the facility or consulting firm project manager will be able to define the nature, frequency, and content of communications between agency personnel and citizen groups), the project managers' efforts to manage the communication channels they can control will affect the nature and substance of the communication channels they cannot control.

Accordingly, for projects like these, it is in the best interest of project managers from the facility and the consulting firm to develop and adhere to communication plans, and in this case, a shared communication plan. Such a communication plan will define who can communicate with whom; the

## Reference

1. *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, Fourth Edition*; Project Management Institute, 2008.



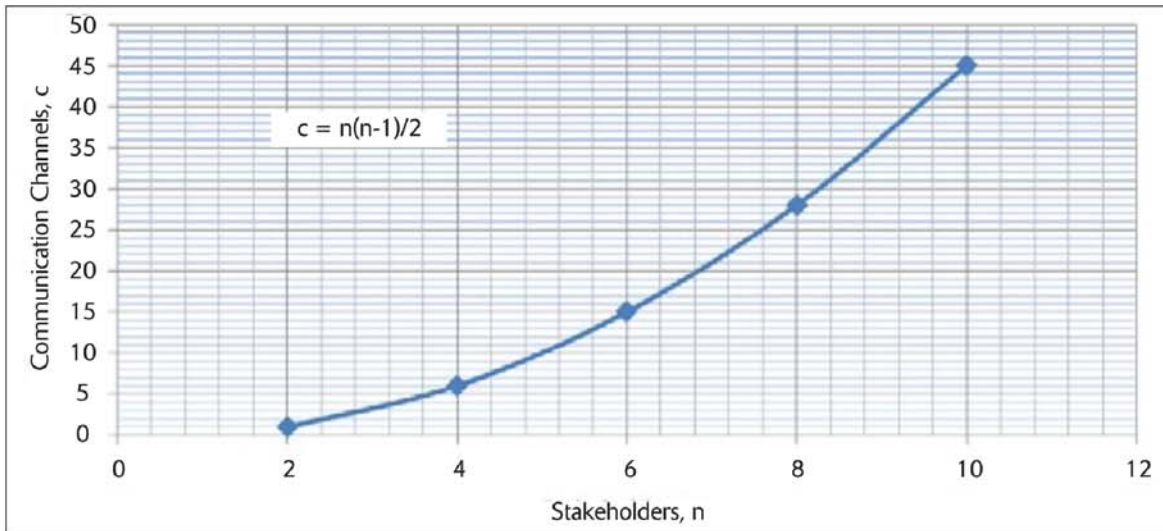


Figure 1. Communication channels grow geometrically with increasing numbers of project stakeholders.

nature, frequency, technology, method, and format of those communications; review and approval processes for special communications; and how communication problems should be resolved. As a result, communications over channels that the project managers' control will be timely, effective, and appropriate, thus supporting accurate, informed communications over the channels that the project managers cannot control. Additionally, when special communications are required or when communication problems arise, stakeholders will know how to respond.

In addition to covering communication mechanics and logistics, the communication plan can include templates for project instructions, meeting agenda and minutes, correspondence, and reports, and other project documents. Because EH&S projects often involve the production of drafts with multiple and simultaneous reviews, the communication plan should also describe document versioning, file nomenclature systems, and processes for submitting review comments. If these items are covered by standard operating procedures or other organizational standards, it is sufficient to reference those procedures or standards in the communication plan.

Increasingly, project managers are relying on Web-based applications for project communications and management. Communication plans for these projects should therefore include information about the proper use of Web-based applications, and in particular, guidance about posting information to the application and the source of most current project information when projects are supported with Web-based tools. Again, standard operating procedures or practices can be referenced, when available.

Communication planning is a vital aspect of project planning. Successful communication planning depends on recognizing the communication needs of stakeholders, enabling communication channels that contribute to project success, limiting communication channels that potentially undermine project success, building on existing procedures and policies, and providing avenues for dealing with special communication needs. And of course, communicating the communication plan to the project team. **em**

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In the past decade, evidence has mounted that certain air pollutants—particles and ozone—are playing an important role in climate change. Although they can travel long distances, their lifespan of weeks is very short compared to carbon dioxide, so they are termed “short-lived climate forcers.” The April issue will provide insights from recent authoritative summaries on the importance of these pollutants, which lie at the intersection between traditional air quality management and climate change programs, with an emphasis on black carbon and associated organics; the role of “reflective” particles (e.g., sulfates and nitrates); and ozone, including relevant precursor gases.

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