

Every Three Ring Circus Needs a Ringmaster!

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Have you ever been to the circus? When there are three rings with multiple performers in each ring, it's practically impossible for the audience to see what is happening in all three rings at once. That's why there is a Ringmaster who is in charge of communicating with the performers and also announcing to the audience what is going on.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) states that 90 percent of a project manager's responsibility is communication. If that 90 percent is done effectively, your success rate will increase. The Ringmaster is an example of the power of communication - managing audience or customer expectations and providing leadership and direction to the three performing teams means the audience can follow what is happening and is much more likely to enjoy the show.

Communication is the Key

Program/Project Managers are the Ringmasters responsible for juggling all the associated communications. In your role, the "know your audience" rule applies. The Ringmaster in the circus may have a few different communication methods depending on the size of the audience and the location – for example, big city coliseum versus small town arena. The Ringmaster won't be able to stand up in front of a large crowded coliseum and simply shout to the audience. You must recognize who your audience is and then determine the appropriate level of communication. Keep in mind that it is crucial to provide the right amount of information to the right people. You should not provide micro-level data to those who don't need it. This will make the "show" more effective and your communication success rate will increase.

Every project manager experiences the challenge of managing expectations and communication is the key to overcoming it. Lack of communication between project team members may lead to the development of unrealistic perceptions and expectations. It can also cause team members to feel left out and out of the loop.

Another important reason to communicate effectively is that regulatory and compliance demands have changed drastically and continue to do so. Communication is essential to meet the requirements of both and it also supports internal auditors in their role.

Leave a Trail

If handled correctly and effectively, communication will be your friend. In the written form, communication provides a history of the progress and decisions relating to a project. For instance, if someone were to ask why the project team took a specific direction six months ago, the answer would be readily available via the communication trail. Always remember that verbal communication is too informal and very often forgot or misconstrued. However, don't discount verbal communication because it can be effectively leveraged by following up with some form of written communication and validation. Always ensure that verbal communication is clearly documented and validated in case you ever need to revisit from a project or legal standpoint.

In this day and time, we are all fully aware of the various forms of communications that are readily available. It is up to the project manager to determine which medium will be most effective according to the audience. Developing a communication plan is a critical step in achieving project success. Not only should project managers have a communication plan for every project, but it is necessary to revalidate it with the entire audience. The communication plan should indicate the appropriate level, frequency and method of communication with each audience.

According to whether or not the Ringmaster is leading a rehearsal or a live show in front of an audience, he will most likely use different modes of communication. He also probably uses different methods to communicate with different people during the actual performance. For instance, he may be communicating with the audience through a microphone and may use hand signals or cues to direct the performers. The list below encompasses some of the various forms of communication required at various times throughout a project:

- Progress reports
- Decisions
- Issue resolutions
- Risk assessments
- Agendas and meeting minutes
- Exception reporting
- All project documentation
- Budget reviews

In the Spotlight

Within a three ring circus the acts and performers are constantly changing. The one constant is the Ringmaster who is always in the spotlight and stays the course of the show. The Ringmaster is responsible for pointing out the various performers and encouraging the audience to participate in the show, as well as applaud the performers.

Not unlike the Ringmaster, the project manager is in the spotlight as various teams and team members around him perform their responsibilities. It is the project manager's duty to garner recognition for the team and to communicate success stories and project related accomplishments amongst themselves, management and the project sponsors.

Project managers must not only be able to recognize and communicate the areas in which the project team is successful, but also should be able to recognize the areas in which their team needs support. Communication between the project manager and the team member is the only method for assessing how individuals are doing. This does not only infer how they are "doing" in their work and schedule commitments, but also how they are doing personally – are they developing professionally, sacrificing personal time, etc.

Making the time and the effort to have open communication between the project manager and the project team will go a long way towards fostering trust. Because project team members generally do not administratively report to the project manager, this reporting structure warrants constant open communication between the two. A good Ringmaster knows his performers, their capabilities and their limitations and must support them throughout, because the show must go on!

Go Manage the Circus

Just like a three ring circus would be chaos if not for the Ringmaster, in order for a project to be successful the project manager must act as a leader. Project managers must juggle a multitude of project related activities and as the project manager you can be great at any of those activities. However, if you can communicate effectively to your team and the necessary participants, it won't matter how great you are at planning or any other project related task because you will be able to manage the circus.

Karen McIsaac, PMP, is an expert in organizing, planning and executing large program/project initiatives. She has over 20 years of experience in delivering large business-driven initiatives with significant business, cultural and technological impact. Karen has assisted the firm's clients create success stories through achievement of project-related business objectives and management of the associated change.

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