



“How to Start and Finish a ‘No-Fail’ Project” Part II: Improving Team Communication

66% of all IT projects are cancelled, significantly delayed or go over budget.
Be in the remaining 34%! Here's how...

According to The Standish Group (www.standishgroup.com), a major IT research institution, only 34% of IT projects are completed on time and within budget. Standish estimates that 51% overrun their schedules and surpass their budgets while 15% are cancelled. Although these findings show vast improvement from their first study in 1994, the rates are still alarming.

In other words, there is only one chance in three that your next project will succeed. These are fairly depressing odds. However, unlike Texas No-Limit Hold'em, your next IT project does not have to be a gamble. By knowing the most common causes of project failure, you and your company can play your cards well and lay down a winning hand every time.

Recognized PM specialists all agree that the following are the primary factors that could ruin your project:

1. Lack of objective project status reports;
2. Poor communication within a team;
3. Internal resistance to the project management tools and methodologies;
4. Changing requirements during development;
5. Inadequate initial project planning.

In this article we will review one of these obstacles – **poor communication within a team** and show some effective ways how to improve it.

You might have the best talents in your team, you might have the most detailed specification and the most comprehensive list of requirements, however unless your team communicates effectively – your project will fail miserably.

There are many factors contributing to the effective team communication, starting with hiring the right people, creating a good work environment and giving your team members the best tools money can buy. However in this article we will assume that you've already read "Peopleware" and all your employees are geniuses with great interpersonal skills sitting in the separate offices with windows and doors and working with the top-of-the-line equipment. Under this assumption we will discuss the top three techniques that will help you to get these people working together as a team, which is the essence of effective communication.

1. Have a central place to manage and store your team communications

There is nothing more frustrating for a project manager than to hear "*You've never told me about this...*" from the team leader two weeks before the product release deadline. Well, it's not entirely true. The only other thing that is even more frustrating – is: "*Oh, no, no, no! What I really meant...*" coming from your customer's mouth one week prior

to the release deadline. But that is something to be discussed in another installment of this series – “*Avoiding the ‘We need one more feature’ trap*”.

In order to eliminate finger-pointing and make sure that every team member knows exactly what their tasks are – follow these simple rules:

- Make one person responsible for a task by assigning it to him in your project management software
- Instead of using e-mails or IM (instant messaging) – use your PM software message boards or forums to discuss project related issues. This will ensure that everyone and everything is literally on the same page. If IM or e-mail communication is unavoidable – copy its content to the message board anyway for history.
- Keep all your project related files in the same **web-based PM** system to make sure no one is going to implement an obsolete requirement based on an outdated specification copied from a long forgotten network folder.

2. Allow for the personal communication preferences

As it was confirmed earlier – your team is full of geniuses. And it’s common knowledge that most of the geniuses are introverts. They don’t want to waste their precious time talking to others or attending a boring project status meeting, while they could use this time to come up with a brilliant ad or code an even more perfect algorithm. But you do need their input and you do need them to communicate with the rest of the team. So give these people the tools they want and the freedom they need. If they don’t want to sit in meetings – that’s fine, as long as they indicate their progress in the project management software or generate a report and send it to their project manager. If they don’t want to have long conversations – even better! Go online and post comments and relevant information to the message board.

3. Make the customers a part of your team

If your team members are communicating perfectly among themselves, however the communication with your customers (external or internal) is not effective – your project is in trouble. You need to make your customers a part of your team; you need to make them work for you. Here are some useful tips:

- Ask your customers to use your PM software instead of e-mails or phone calls to submit new requests. Not only will this help to track the history but will also train your clients to not abuse the “One more little feature” habit. When a client can see a list of all the new requests he has submitted – it will make him think twice before adding another one to the pile.

- Make it easy for your customers to report defects, e.g. setup your PM system to download e-mails from a dedicated *support@...* account and post them as *issues*. Then configure the system to automatically assign new issues to the Team Leader or QA Lead. This will ensure that nothing slips through the cracks.
- Encourage your customers to post their feedback and discuss the project using the project message board. Again it will help to keep the project transparent and minimize the risk of unpleasant surprises to both you and your customers.

Following these three simple techniques will help you build a stronger and a more efficient team and help keep your project on the right track:

- 1) Have a central place to manage and store your team communications
- 2) Allow for personal communication preferences
- 3) Make customers a part of your team

And who knows... Maybe from now on you will only hear *"Are you kidding? It's already done..."* from your team and *"Wow!"* from your customers.

Easy Projects .NET can help you improve your team communication!

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