

COMMUNICATION AS A CRUCIAL ELEMENT IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The initiative of this study was to identify the elements that are important corner stones in the planning and life cycle of a project. Communication is not seen as a corner stone for Project Management, but only as an element. No other research has indicated communication as a corner stone of project management. A research questionnaire focussing on the role of communication, communication instruments and communication elements in the construction industry, was circulated to prominent architects, contractors, engineers and quantity surveyors. Results show that professionals need to improve their communication skills and that the survey respondents rate communication high, as an element in the successful execution at a project. Results also indicate that the stakeholders of a project should strive to improve their communication skills on all levels in order to successfully complete projects. The success is in the proposal of a quadrate with corner stones instead of the known triangle with corner stones. Respondents found communication to be as important as time and cost, and even more important than scope. More effective communication methods, instruments and approaches should further benefit the construction industry as a whole.

Key words: Communication elements, communication, communication instruments, project management

INTRODUCTION

People are aware that communication is the key to a smooth interaction with others. Unfortunately, communication is taken for granted and is assumed to be an easy task. It is therefore usually rendered as common sense and not much time is dwelt on improving it.

In the construction industry, most people see communication as an element to use and not as a corner stone in the managing of a project. Communication is the element that sells and resells ideas, explaining the scope and methodologies of the project to diverse groups of people (the public, management, functional departments and other stakeholders), threatening or bargaining with service providers and suppliers, or negotiating to settle disputes or interpersonal conflict between project team members or stakeholders (Steyn, 2003: 274-275).

PLANNING PROJECT COMMUNICATION

Properties such as uniqueness, uncertainty, risky, tight budgets, deadlines and strict time schedules make the management of projects complex and exciting, but also stressful. Considering that a variety of stakeholders, each with similar or different requirements for the project, participate in the process, it is clear that an effective *communication plan* must be established and followed throughout the lifecycle of the project (Steyn, 2003: 275).

To achieve completion of construction projects each of the parties involved must have a thorough understanding of what is required of them. Information becomes essential to each of the parties and such information is sourced through communication. The significance of communication can be seen from the planning to the completion of a project, throughout the lifecycle and phases of a project as shown in Figure 1.

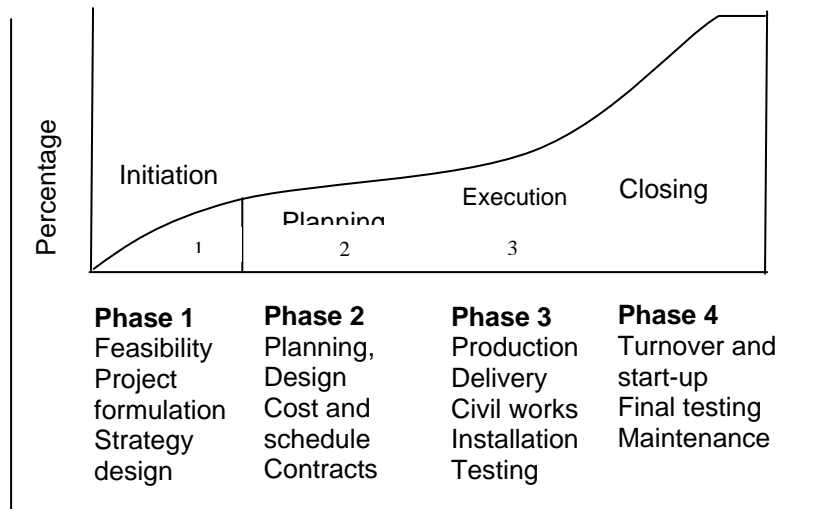


Figure 1: Project lifecycle and phases
Source: (Adapted from Knipe, 2002: 32)

According to Lewis in Knipe (2002: 18), managing a project has the following critical elements, namely time, cost, scope and quality. During the phases of a project the elements, scope, cost and time, may be seen as corner stones of a project (Figure 2).

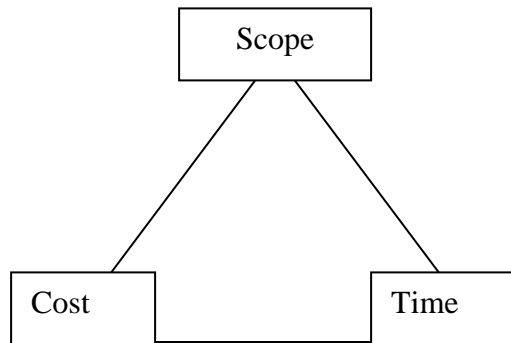


Figure 2: Corner Stone model
Source: (Kotze, 2008: own diagram)

Scope

Scope is an explicit version of the client's objective. The client first exhibits a desire or need to engage in a building project. Through extensive communication, the project manager is appointed by the client so that the rest of the project team is in-turn briefed by the project manager. The documentation of the scope is the vital result from the communication undertaken by the project team. Documentation, in written form, becomes the reference point and control mechanism of the project.

Time

Project time management involves determining the time needed to complete the project and scheduling the various activities to meet the time (Knipe, 2002: 139). Time is an important component to the success of a project. It is also important to assign time limits for the completion of tasks because without a clear definition of expected time constraints, an indefinite time span will lead to failure to produce the project objectives as stated in the scope. The determination of cost of time as a time management process is worthy to note. The concept is that a unit of time is allocated a price or cost (Knipe, 2002: 141). Thus, time is money.

Cost

The cost corner stone relates to the funds that should be available for the successful start, project execution and completion of a project. Tools such as cost estimating and cost reporting are essential for the project. The objective of cost management is to maintain financial control of the project through the lifecycle (Oosthuizen, Koster and De La Rey, 1998: 62). Cost information is relayed to the client as accurately and timely as possible to enable decision-making, relating to continuing or halting the project.

A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT

A successful project relies on the project managers' responsibility to develop the project's communication plan, the flow of communication and communication strategies. Communication planning pulls the project together. The project manager and project office are the heart of the project.

The communication plan should outline:

- Who (lines of communication sender- and receiver-responsibility and authority)
- What (scope of communication and format)
- How (e-mail, document, telephone, meeting, presentation)
- When (schedule)
- Feedback (confirm message received and understood – document control)
- Filing (retrieval, storing, disaster recovery) (Burke, 2003: 274)

Communication flows in four directions: downwards, upwards, horizontally and laterally. These basic communication flows are shown in Figure 3.

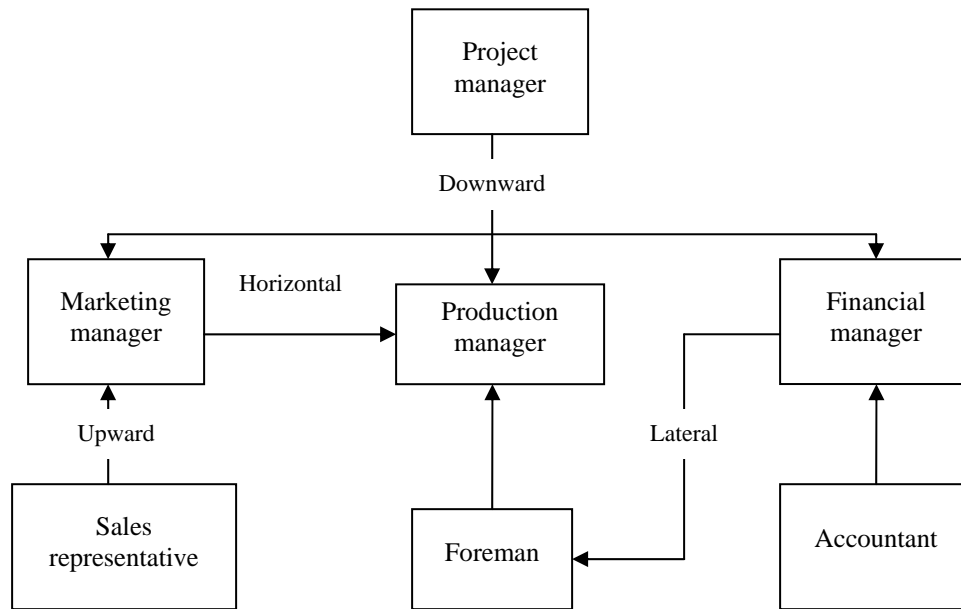


Figure 3: Communication flows
Source: (Smit & Cronje, 2002: 372)

Communication strategies are determined by the goals and objectives that the project should achieve.

COMMUNICATION AND THE INDUSTRY

Research was done by the Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management at the University of the Free State.

A survey was conducted to establish the current performance of professional consultants in respect of their communication and communication instruments in the construction industry. Professionals (architects, engineers, project managers and quantity surveyors) were requested to respond to the questionnaire. More than a thousand questionnaires were sent to these professionals in the RSA. The response rate was less than 10%.

The opinions of relevant parties in the building-, property development- and construction industry, on what good communication entails, was determined and interpreted. The effectiveness of professional communication and communication instruments, was established.

The following are some of the most important findings:

- Communication is strategic – now more than ever. In an information-driven age, communication is an integral part of the corporate strategy
- Writing is still the core skill for communication. Verbal, written and contractual communication was rated almost the same in importance

Figure 4 shows the respondents ratings for verbal, written and contractual communication skills of Architects, Engineers, Project Managers and Quantity Surveyors.

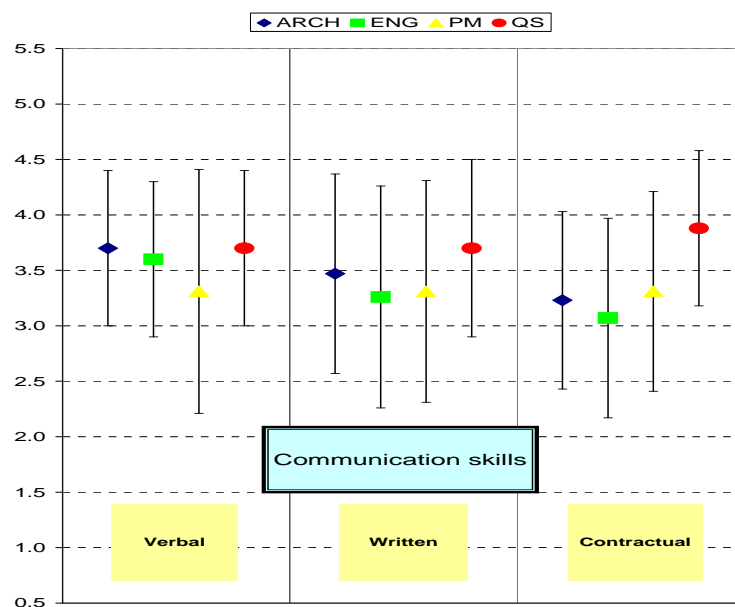


Figure 4 Communication skills

Source: (University of the Free State, Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management, 2007) The ratings are: 1 = low, 3 = intermediate, 5 = high

Figure 5 shows the importance of communication as an element in the successful project execution.

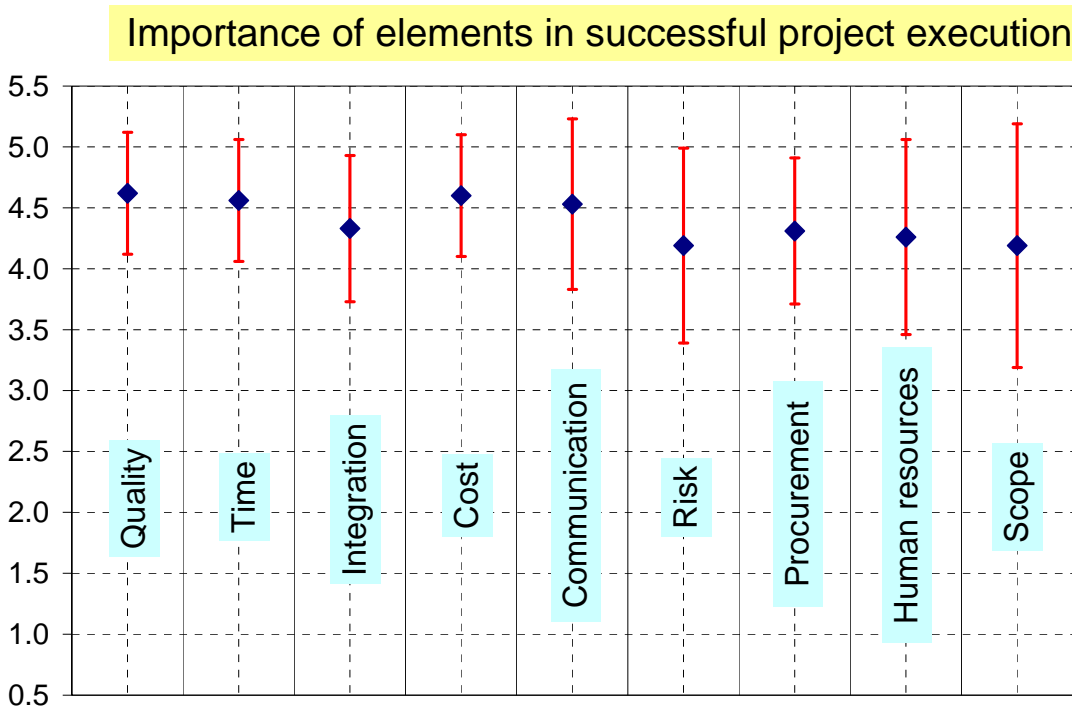


Figure 5. Importance of elements in successful project execution.

Source: (University of the Free State, Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management, 2007) (The ratings are: 1= low, 3= intermediate, 5 = high)

- Results on the instruments of communication elements indicate that communication is as important, as the corner stones, time and cost, and even more important than scope.

Problems in communication occur when:

- People do not listen carefully
- There may be too many links in the communication chain
- Verbal communication makes up a great part of our daily communication, yet, it is alarming to see how little one really remembers of what is heard during normal communication. Research has shown that people remember:
 - 10% of what is read
 - 20% of what is heard
 - 30% of what is seen
 - 50% of what is heard and seen, and
 - >50% is practice and behaviour while hearing and seeing (Le Roux, 1999: 136).

CONCLUSION

Projects are run by communication. Communication is the primary method project managers use to influence professionals involved and persuade them to give of their best in order to ensure successful project completion. As the research results indicated, not only cost, scope, time and quality are the corner stones, but also communication. Figure 6 shows how the new corner stone model should look.

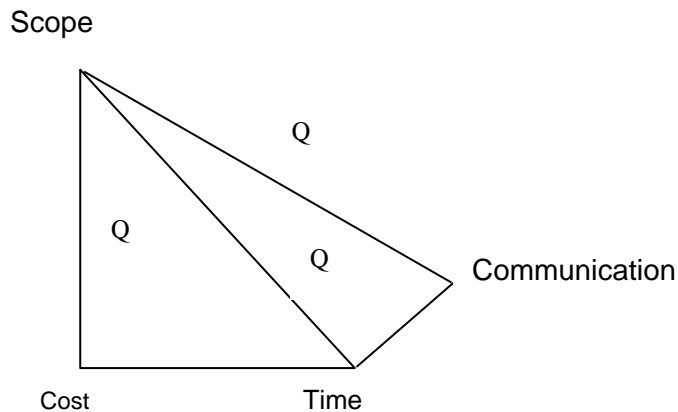


Figure 6: New Corner Stone model

Source: (Kotze, 2008: Own diagram)

Communication is the life-blood of a project and without the knowledge, skills and experience of a professional leader, the project will not be successful. Most of the elements of project management can, to a large extent, if managed and controlled, be delegated on a project. Communication is so crucial it must be skilfully executed by the Project Manager.

Leadership in respect of communication is a subject being planned for further research.

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