

TALK IT OUT

Communication Is The Key To Completing A Successful Project



by Steve Thorburn

Information management.

That is what project management really consists of: *Information management*, i.e. communication.

As project managers, we need to be responsible information managers. We need to keep people informed of when and what items are needed to keep the design moving. We need to make sure the products are ordered and in the shop on time. And we need to make sure we have the necessary crew to install the system in the owner's facility. The three major task areas are engineering, shop work, and fieldwork.

During the course of project management there is a lot of time when we are not working directly with the client. We are back in our cave, focused on whatever needs to be done to move the project along. But sometimes we focus too hard and communicate too little: we can and should do a better job of keeping the whole support team in the loop during all phases of the project.

An industry that designs and installs sophisticated communications systems is in a position to excel at sharing information among its own teams. And the rewards of doing so are great.

When you work closely with your owners (the folks who pay for the systems, and use them) you will find they are eager to be in the loop. Keeping the owner involved builds a relationship of trust, and things will go more smoothly even when the news you have to share is less than ideal. What if you have to report a delay because the factory that makes a subcomponent for an audio processor or dis-

play burned down and everybody is scrambling to find replacement parts? If you have been communicating well all along, they will most likely understand and work with you to find a way around the problem. The key is that you kept a dialogue going.

Communication alters perception, and it alters results. What if the owner hasn't had an update from you in weeks, then abruptly learns in a team meeting that you cannot meet opening day because your boss had to move your crew to a different job, because you had nothing for them to do for a month due to the product delay? Not only were they deprived of timely information, but they were also deprived of the chance to help find a solution.

We have become an instant information society. We want it *now*, we need it *now*, and so do our owners. The most successful projects have a strong lead project manager who demands communication between all of the trades on site. As a responsible information manager, he or she in-

sists on weekly reports from each trade: where they are with their schedules, what may be holding things up, what can be done to move faster and more efficiently.

Good communication also enriches job satisfaction and builds skills. Some of the most enjoyable projects of which I have been a part were those in which the lead tech in the field provided not only weekly, but daily email status reports. These reports were sent to everybody: the shop, the designers, the project administrator, and yes, the owner. Within 30 seconds, we all knew where the project was that day, what had to be sent back because the (fill in the blank here) did not work—in short, we shared the war stories. And sharing them on the spot led to joint problem solving. When we saw that someone might be struggling with an item that was not a typical detail, or that the software was not letting them do what was needed, we could quickly respond and get them back on track. And whether goals and deadlines were met on time or whether they slipped a few days, everyone, including the owner, shared the ups and downs, and the project was considered a success by all involved.

On the other hand, when communication does not take place, and you (or the owner) have to call and call and email and email to find out the status of something, then the project is not so likely to be considered a success. And the perception of success—especially in the eyes of the owner—is part of the reality of success. ■



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