Communication (It's Never Enough)

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Ronald Cohn, David Ralston
Ralston Consulting Group

Dr. Ronald Cohn and David Ralston are senior consultant and managing partner respectively for the Ralston Consulting Group, a 20 year old organization development firm. They specialize in helping people work together in many different industries through many activities including executive coaching, team building, leadership development, work process redesign, and strategic planning. They can be reached at rcohn@getralston.com, dralston@getralston.com, their company website at www.getralston.com or at 801-328-1820.

Spouses say it's important. Superintendents do too. Yet, for all the ballyhoo about relationship and project failures tied to communication, it remains an ambiguous phrase that conjures up many different images. Communication can refer to expectations, status updates, or performance feedback. It can be about sharing timely bid information during estimating, or clarifying the "how-people-get-paid process." Simply stating that during a project all parties need to communicate can mean just about anything. So, it is important to narrow the definition of communication, recognizing specific objectives.

One objective is task accomplishment, while the other is to maintain healthy relationships. In the workplace, both must receive sufficient attention.

Communication Clarifies Roles, Expectations

Several task-related situations can create friction, and the following communication tools can provide a remedy.

One often-overlooked, task-related situation is an owner stating project expectations to an architect or general contractor about the cost of the project, the timeline, or the structure's look and feel. By understanding the potential for architect and contractor misreads, clarifying project expectations early can prevent later finger-pointing.

Another communication circumstance arises when a boss gives direction on a specific task or describes an individual's overall role. While clarity is always important, it is particularly helpful for a new hire who is trying to understand the lay of the land.

An additional boss' tool is to conduct an assimilation meeting. This session includes the boss stating his preferences regarding decision-making, information-sharing, providing feedback and conducting staff meetings. Sub-contractors working with a new general contractor can also benefit from this vehicle as each general contractor manages projects, people, and subcontractors in a unique fashion. In setting expectations, it is critical to make the implicit, more explicit. Assuming common understanding may be dangerous — especially when those assumptions cause rework, resulting in time and money losses.

In addition to setting expectations, communication also can help identify which decisions are the responsibility of each party. For example, project managers must articulate which decisions a site superintendent can and cannot make. The same goes for project managers knowing what is theirs to decide or what must be "kicked upstairs." Without that clarity, awkward decision overrides can result, creating ill feelings.

Meetings Put a Human Face on Projects

Pre-construction meetings provide an opportunity for architects, project managers, site superintendents and subcontractors to get together and review plans, specs and the overall project timeline. The meetings can also establish processes to determine change orders, create a forum for disputes, and introduce who else is working the project. In addition, contractors can conduct single subcontractor pre-installation meetings to clarify the job particulars. These meetings decrease the number of blame-ridden "I didn't know" or "no one told me" reactions to emerging project issues.

Fred Mulligan, president of $120 million, Worcester, Mass.-based Cutler Associates, insists on putting a human face on projects and uses a version of both meetings.

"We employ project kickoff and weekly subcontractor meetings not only for common project understanding, but also for the relationship-building opportunities. Meeting face to face allows us to have human moments, critical for downstream problem-solving," he says.

Contractors can also reduce the "no one told me syndrome" by harnessing technology to their advantage. With today's Internet and project integration software, entire construction teams can get real-time, project-status updates and access to critical plan documents easily.

Mulligan uses a software system that functions as an informational conduit to subcontractors so that they all keep abreast of each other's and the overall project's progress. Mulligan says, "It just makes sense for whoever has the information to be able to distribute it. With this technology, we can all sing from the same sheet of music. Everyone keeps informed, almost in real time. It has resulted in minimizing rework which our owners appreciate."

Whereas technology certainly helps, it is not the only solution. In the absence of the team accessing the same technology, face-to-face or phone status updates can satisfy information needs. Project managers or subcontractors can't fully count on the other party to be ready to start unless they interface on a timely basis. Waiting until the day of a concrete pour to ensure that all the forms are in place has trouble written all over it. Speaking beforehand to ensure readiness can eliminate wasted labor, equipment usage, and materials unavailability.

Ways to Build Healthy Relationships

While all these task-related communication mechanisms are helpful, they are not foolproof. Even with full use they are not going to eliminate mishaps completely. So, adding relationship-building mechanisms and tools to the mix is critical. They can address conflict, increase understanding, and lead to "making lemonade" from potential lemons.

Providing feedback is one of those mechanisms. Letting people know that they met the performance expectations increases the likelihood that desired results continue to occur. On the other hand, providing constructive criticism in a way that minimizes defensiveness reduces the chance of ongoing underachievement and disappointment. Providing this feedback, a critical project management skill, is woefully underused.

Perry Herrmann, vice president of operations of the $50-million, Denver-based Riviera Electric knows it better than most. "Although the day of the screaming superintendent or project manager is dead, people running projects can become defensive when receiving constructive criticism," he says. "Even with calmer heads, most people avoid delivering feedback as they often lack the skill to deliver it so it would be heard appropriately. They sidestep giving these messages in fear that they may worsen an already tense situation."

However, as most people have experienced, rarely does "letting a sleeping dog lie" lead to solutions or make the conflict go away.

Frequently, people's unwillingness to confront questionable performance or deal with a tense issue leads to further difficulties. Given these realities, Riviera Electric has consistently trained its staff in listening and delivering tough messages. Riviera takes great care in ensuring that employer performance feedback is specific and evokes non- defensive responses. That training has greatly improved its long-term relationships both within the company and with its construction partners.

People cannot take for granted that their message is understood in the way they intended. To ensure that clarity occurs, colleagues need to confirm their understanding by paraphrasing, "let me see if I understand", or asking, "what's your sense of" prior to ending a meeting. This clarifying moment can significantly reduce material, labor or time spent heading down the wrong path.

Another relationship-based communication mechanism revolves around dealing with mistakes. When mistakes are simply written off as another communication mishap, blame is typically attached. Forward-seeking project managers can use these mishaps as opportunities to figure out root causes and new solutions to ensure that this situation doesn't arise again. Not only does blame lessen, but mutually acceptable problem-solving begins to take root as a norm that is then transferable from situation to situation.

Projects don't build themselves, people do. If time and quality result in dollars, and consistent communication is a foundation for on-time, on-budget construction, then all facets of communication are central. Owners would be more satisfied and contractors more profitable if they agreed on expectations early, conducted face-to-face meetings, made technologically based status updates available and provided direct performance and behavioral feedback. Experience suggests that owners and contractors that work at establishing a mutually beneficial relationship, have a way of doing it again and again.