



***9 reasons why project communications
don't cut through***

A White Paper by Lynne Cazaly

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Change initiatives are a constant in organisations and businesses. New systems, processes and programmes of work, new structures, projects, teams and units...

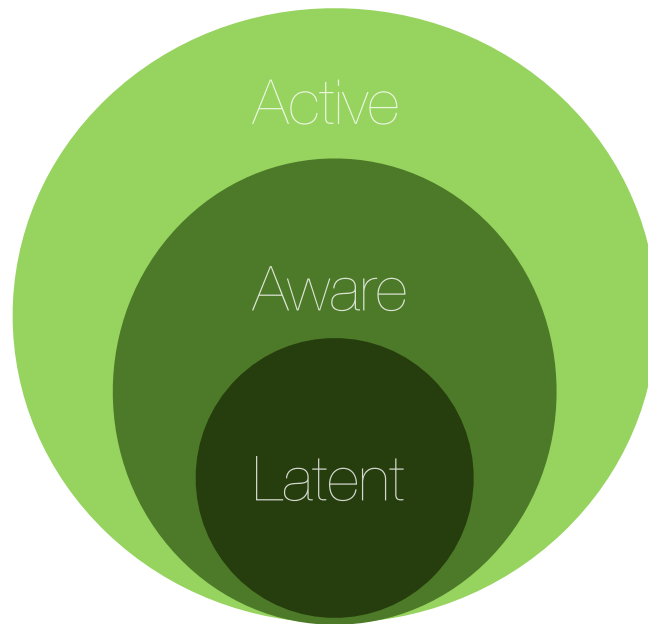
People talk of 'change fatigue' and many projects and initiatives are greeted with rolling eyes and murmurs (or screams?) of "not more change!!"

If there's so much change, why is the communication of projects still poorly handled? **Why don't people buy-in?** From my observations and working with business organisations over recent years, project communications still have plenty of **room for improvement.**

After a project is completed (including a post-implementation review) why do teams report feeling disengaged, ill-informed and left out of the loop... on projects ... still?

If change is a constant, and project teams aren't going away, it's time we got project comms sorted out so they are competent ... no, make that ***excellent, brilliant and effective!***

1. Huh? What change?



Imagine the deck of a cruise ship, travelling from port to port. On the upper pool deck, striped sun lounges are filled with dozing passengers. It's only a scheduled all-you-can-eat meal or the Captain shrieking 'Abandon Ship Abandon Ship' over the address system that rouses them from their sleep.

Authors Dozier, Grunig and Grunig in their book *Manager's guide to excellence in public relations and communication management*, speak of audiences who are hidden or dormant.

The target audiences for your communications program are snoozing on their deckchairs (or desk chairs) in your organisation.

They're '**latent**'. You need to wake them up and make them **aware**. Attempting to speed straight to 'please do this new thing' as part of a project is like prodding a snoozing passenger; a grumble, a groan and they'll just roll over.

Once they're aware, you can engage to shift towards them making changes – the final step of being **active**.

WHAT TO DO:

Zzzzzz your audiences are asleep. Wake them gently and then when they're alert, present your change communication messages to them.

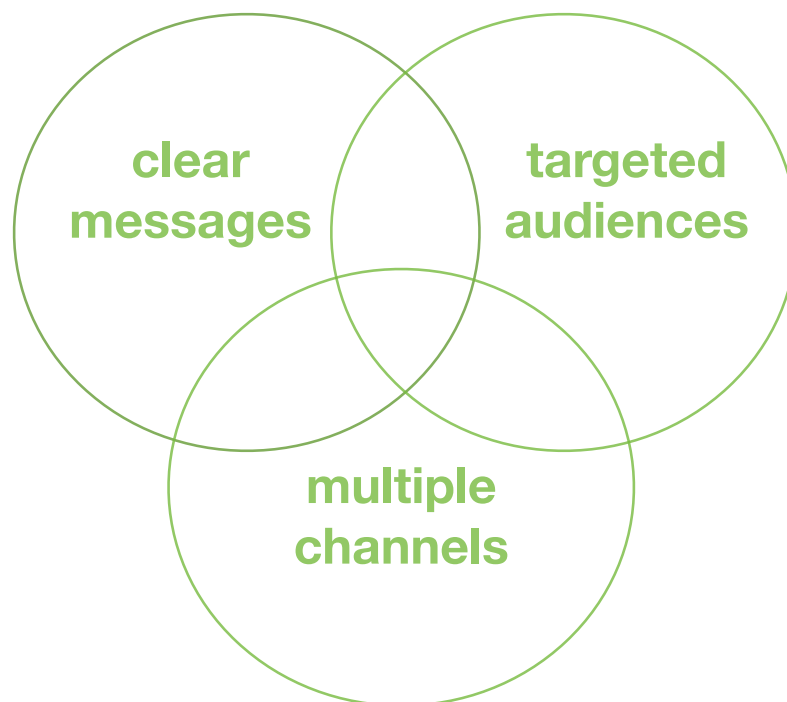
2. The big ... ummm, afterthought

Many communication strategies for projects are 'bolted on' like an afterthought.

It's like a big air-conditioner being bolted on to the outside of a sleek, new, straight-of-the-production-line car. Clunky, inefficient and far from elegant. When communication strategies are post-fitted, they don't work as well as when they're integrated to the program - in the factory!

Integrated project communications involves **clear messages**, **targeted audiences** and **multiple channels**. You can't just bolt that on.

Creating a communications strategy once the project or program has begun is too late.



WHAT TO DO:

Start the communications first – as an integrated part and in the lead up to the project or piece of work. That's before the project or program starts. Then communications strategies can be designed for all elements of the program, throughout the program, rather than a 'quick, take it to market now' reaction.

3. Urgent for ...?

“We’ve got to make sure we create some urgency around this change piece!”

“If we create the urgency, people will get on board... they’ll help make the change a reality.”

These are real quotes. Many projects and programs are positioned as being ‘urgent’ – make it happen now!

For some of these programs it’s the *urgency* that’s actually turning people off.

Change itself can be fairly well tolerated; it’s the pushing and the driving that builds resistance. It’s the ‘now now now’ that makes people feel uncomfortable.

WHAT TO DO:

If change is urgent, explain why – really and truly, honestly explain why it is urgent. Not your secret reason with spin attached to it.

Outline the consequences of action and inaction and why acting now will be better than acting in a few weeks, months and years.

PS: Don’t make urgency a project communications strategy or message.

4. What's in it for me anyway?

People *do* make changes in their lives. Yes we all have routines and habits – some of us more than others - but to believe that people resist a project's change is misguided.

People tend to resist the things associated with the change:

- the way it is packaged and communicated,
- the speed of the shift,
- the amount of change.

If they can't see how they might benefit from it or be impacted by it, they'll resist and block.

Number one for people is me me me. What's in it for me? Start with why, then what the change or project is, how it will work and what it means for the future.



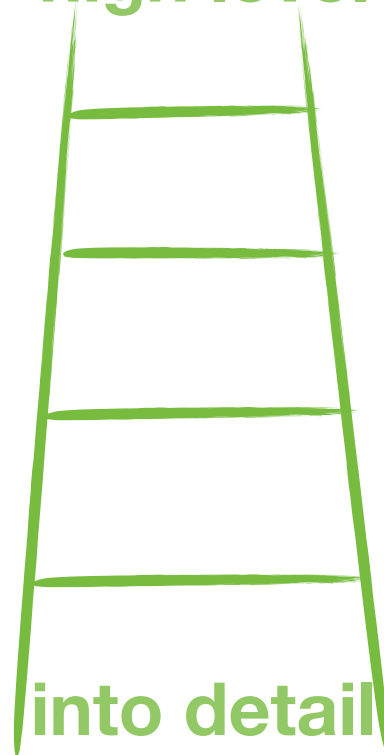
WHAT TO DO:

When you frame and position your communication (that isn't 'spin' by the way) be sure to include plenty of 'what's in it for them'; the things that will appeal to individual desires. What will happen that will lead to a benefit for them? What's in it for them. Not you, them. Read up on Bernice McCarthy's 4MAT System for further details on framing.

5. Too high level

bigger picture

high level



into detail

on the ground

You know how there are people in your team and organisation who love the bigger picture? In fact, it might be you... talking about the future, the wider view of a project, the context and bigger situation, the vision - waving their arms with big, broad brush strokes.

For some folks this is just too 'out there' and too difficult to grasp. It's too conceptual, too hopeful, at times seemingly impossible and most of the time it's talking about things *we can't even see yet*, let alone imagine.

WHAT TO DO:

Step DOWN off the ladder, land the helicopter or descend the stairs – do whatever you need to do to make things more realistic for the folks who need some more concrete details.

Explain how a specific project will work, run through scenarios of existing clients, colleagues or stakeholders.

Use real examples and apply your bigger picture to some of the finer details.

6. Too detailed

So if that wasn't you, the big picture person, high on the ladder, maybe you're down on the ground in the detail?

If you know what it's like for the people at the business frontline and like to get into the nitty gritty – you're on the ground and into the detail.

Beware: the project communications you're putting out there could be so detailed that you're losing people. They could be back snoozing again on their deckchairs. (*see 1. Huh? What change?*)

They're switching off as you launch yourself down, down, down, into the specifics that haven't been designed or implemented and can't be fathomed or imagined by the masses.

Warning: Detail divers can cause eye glaze. Often.

WHAT TO DO:

Step UP on to the ladder, and work your way up to the big why, the big what's going on, and the big 'because' of the project or piece of work.

Then move back down to your detail.

Then back up again to the bigger picture.

Tread carefully as you move up and down – we don't need workplace injuries and accidents!

7. Sorry, I can't see what you're talking about

Dan Roam in his books *'The Back of the Napkin'* and *'Blah Blah Blah – What to do when words don't work'* explains how 75% of our brains are wired to handle visuals. He urges us to not let our messages get lost in verbal noise.

Projects and change programs that are communicated with 32-page PowerPoint packs are blah blah blah. Too much noise.

How can you expect people to swiftly grasp what the project, change or initiative is about if it takes them so long for their brain to 'see' what you're talking about?

You know you need to use pictures and visuals – but of what?



WHAT TO DO:

Think shape first. Is this project implementation or outcome like a circle, square or triangle?

Think metaphor or simile: what is this project, thing, change or transition like? How are the changes and project milestones like or similar to other things? Some of Edward de Bono's lateral and creative thinking tools could be helpful here.

Create a simple-to-sketch visual of the process, program or change. What will happen when, to whom and how? Is it a gradual process of change, a series of steps or a big transformational shift? What are things like now? What will they be like in the future? Use visuals to show the now and the future... and the journey in between.

8. Disguising information as consultation

Consultation meetings, workshops with stakeholders, conversations with sponsors...

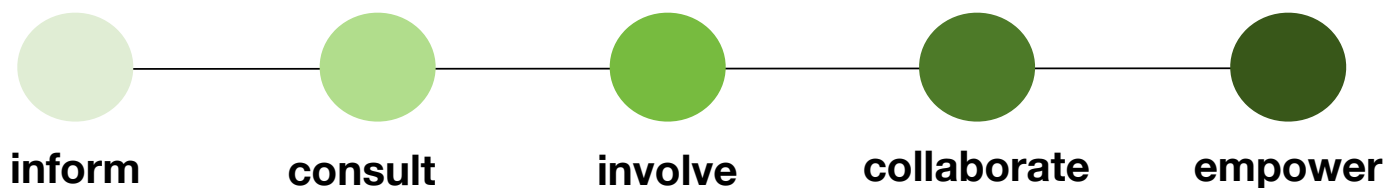
The ongoing communication, consultation and engagement with the people connected to a project are never-ending.

Sometimes you need to let them **know** what's happening.

Sometimes you want to know what they **think**.

Sometimes you need them to **do** something.

Confusing these outcomes can lead to all manner of communication problems, which in turn, can lead to issues with trust, engagement and ultimately, disengagement. Snoozing cruise passengers, remember...?



The International Association of Public Participation's consultation spectrum outlines the five phases of participation in projects and programs of work.

Be clear where you're at on the spectrum. If you're informing people of something, don't dress it up as consultation. If they have the power to put things into effect, make that clear. If you want to collaborate and work together, don't confuse that with simply informing or updating.

WHAT TO DO:

Review and plan for communications with stakeholders, sponsors, customers and team members.

Tell them where and how you need their involvement: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating or empowering. Or a combination. Don't dress up information as consultation. If you don't need people's input, say so. If it's an information briefing, say so.

9. How do you expect me to 'get it' if you don't?

Projects and change programs are complex. They can run for months and years, involve many people across the business and run on budgets in to the millions and beyond.

Given this complexity, operating over an extended period of time, clarity is vital.

People on the project or change team must be able to articulate why it's important, what it's about, how it will help the business, the problems it solves.

When I'm working with project teams and businesses, I see too many people who can't tell the 'project story'... even when they are months (or years) into the project.

If you get too deep into a change piece or program you can lose sight of the why, what, how and what if of the project.

To influence, communicate and engage others – you have to 'get it'. And get it good. At all times.

WHAT TO DO:

Determine the project story – what was, what is, what will be.

Present this information in a tasty way (that won't leave your audiences with indigestion).

Regularly review and update the story.

Refine key messages.

Check on audience understanding of the story.

Work towards a happy ending!

Want to know more?

These are some starters in achieving engaging communication on projects and change programs.

Lynne Cazaly is a communications specialist and master facilitator. She provides clarity to project complexity through workshops, training and visual strategy.

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