Effective Communication Management: A Key to Stakeholder Relationship Management in Project-Based Organizations

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Efficient stakeholder relationship management is an essential requirement for any successful organization. It is a decisive factor and has a direct impact on total environment and profit results of the organization. A methodological approach is needed for proactive stakeholder relationship management in view of the varied stakeholders who have altogether different sorts of expectations and needs. Effective communication management can serve as a strong tool to systematically manage the stakeholder relationships at multiple levels. The main objective of the study is to explore the use of effective communication in stakeholder relationship management and also to find out a methodological framework to use communication as an effective tool for managing successful stakeholder relationships at all levels. The study is conducted through a questionnaire survey and structured interviews of stakeholders working at different project organizations. The results indicate applications of communication in managing multiple functions of stakeholder management. A framework for effective communication management is suggested as a part of the results which can be used by practitioners in all types of project organizations for successful stakeholder relationship management.

Introduction

Efficient stakeholder management is an essential requirement for any successful organization. Stakeholders are individuals, groups or organizations who may affect or be affected by the outcome of the project (Freeman and Reed, 1983). Most of the profitable business organizations today believe in having strong relationships with relevant stakeholder groups in their business, may it be customers, distributors, employees or shareholders. Stakeholder management is actively and effectively managing these important relationships. Yet there is a need for a methodological approach and an effective tool to manage these varied stakeholders who have altogether different sorts of expectations and needs. Especially, in the context of today's global economy, achieving

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sustainable stakeholder relationships is a big challenge for most of the project organizations. A Project-Based Organization (PBO) is different from general organizations in the sense that within a PBO, a project is the primary business mechanism for coordinating and integrating all the main business functions of the firm (e.g., production, R&D, engineering, NPD, marketing, personnel, and finance) (Hobday, 2000). In contrast to the matrix, functional, and other forms, the PBO is one in which the project is the primary unit for production organization, innovation, and competition (Hobday, 2000). According to PMBOK®, PBO refers to various organizational forms that create temporary systems for carrying out their work. Businesses that need and expect fast innovation are most likely to be and suited to PBO.

In this background, it is important to note that unlike the focus of traditional project management, on the stakeholders themselves, a large number of researchers in recent years have taken stakeholder relationships into account (Cova and Salle, 2006). According to Cleland (1986) and Jergeas *et al.* (2000), "Efficient management of the relationships between the project and its stakeholders is an important key to project success". Successful project relationships are fundamental and a key aspect for successful delivery of projects and for meeting stakeholder expectations, believes Hartman (2002).

Effective communication can serve as a great tool to systematically manage the stakeholder relationships at multiple levels. Communication and stakeholder engagement processes and practices are often described as 'soft', as dealing with people (stakeholders) and developing appropriate messages for information exchange (communication) is difficult because people's behaviors are unpredictable and it is difficult to develop objective (tangible) means to measure progress or even success in engaging stakeholders effectively (Bourne, 2016). Unless the project teams are able to manage the communications right, the time spent on developing plans and controls will be dissipated because the right information has not reached the right people, or it has been ignored or misunderstood and is therefore ineffective (Bourne, 2016). Meeting the expectations of the stakeholders is very important. But without proper flow of information, this is not possible. Incomplete or wrong communication generates wrong perceptions. Thus, the stakeholder relationships may become negative without proper communication. A project's success or failure is also dependent on how well it meets the stakeholders' expectations and their perceptions of its value. Effective communication can help in managing the perceptions and expectations of stakeholders.

Literature Review

In the last few years, the focus in the organizational theory seems to have shifted to the invasive environment in which the organizations operate, mainly due to the demands of increasing number of entities which the firms need to engage with to be successful and have a competitive advantage over others. This set up necessitates the organizations to have proactive alliances or proactive relationship management with the multiple entities operating in some ways with them.

Effective Communication Management

Effective Communication Management refers to systematic initiatives directed towards planning, monitoring and controlling all communication channels within an organization. Aspects of communication management include developing corporate communication strategies, designing internal and external communications directives, and managing the flow of information, including online communication (Johnson, 2012). Communication management in projects in many ways is a proactive endeavor from management side to manage the expectations and requirements of all stakeholder groups involved in the project.

Effective communication management signifies a process in which multiple types of communications are delivered in such a way that the objective for which the communication is released is achieved to the maximum extent. In a project context, as mentioned by Kerzner (1987), the definition of effective communication includes the following essential factors: (a) an exchange of information, (b) an act or instance of transmitting information, (c) verbal or a written message, (d) a technique for expressing ideas effectively, and (e) a process by which meanings are exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols.

Effective communication management in the case of stakeholder relationship management is a process of effective information exchange—it is about ensuring that the project or other activity receives the information it needs to manage stakeholder expectations and ensure that the work is progressing in the best way possible. It is also about providing each stakeholder, particularly the most important stakeholders, with the information they need to believe that their expectations are known and being delivered (Bourne, 2016).

In this study, the framework suggested in the work of Bourne (2013) is considered for understanding the concept of effective communication management. She has suggested five crucial steps for managing stakeholder relationships through effective communications and the same are considered in the present study as reference for understanding the concept of efficiency in communication. The steps are: (1) Identify all stakeholders of the project, (2) Prioritize the stakeholder needs, (3) Visualize and decide the necessary stakeholder management strategy, (4) Engage stakeholders, and (5) Monitor the stakeholder communication during all the project stages. The first three steps provide the information necessary to develop effective communication strategies; step 4 enables the team to identify the stakeholders who need additional information to the regular reports that the organization mandates. Step 5 will provide the means to see if the communication strategy that has been implemented has been successful. If the gap between current attitude and the target attitude is closed, the team can be assured that the communication has been effective and that the stakeholder is receiving the information that will ensure he/she is appropriately engaged. If the gap has not closed or become wider, this is the trigger to know that the communication strategy is not working and the team needs to try something different.

Stakeholder Management

Freeman (1984), one of the early proponents of the idea of organizational stakeholders, defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives". Stakeholders of any organization have varying influences and roles that are subject to change with time but still there can be interconnectedness between various stakeholders. Wheeler and Silanpaa (1997) pointed out that basically stakeholder management is a question of creating a balance, and they predict that stakeholder inclusive organizations will outperform stakeholder exclusive organizations in the 21st century.

Different researchers have suggested different approaches to manage stakeholders. Jones (1995) advocates contracts with stakeholders based on mutual trust and collaboration. Wicks *et al.* (1994) support a collaborative approach to deal with stakeholders. According to Van de Ven and Andrew (1980), stakeholder management increases commitment, shared values, and provides a wider range of information and improved decision making. Rowley (1997) has proposed a network model for stakeholder management. According to him, stakeholders have relationships with organizations as well as with each other through formal communication or some sort of interaction. In Boutilier's (2009) work, he describes stakeholder networks as "bonding, bridging, and linking social networks". Mitchell *et al.* (1997) during the same time, has proposed a new model, wherein he propounds that we can identify different classes of stakeholders by the possession, or the attributed possession, of three relationship attributes, that is, power, legitimacy, and urgency. According to him, project managers can understand the change of stakeholders' salience by analyzing the possession of these three attributes.

It appears from the review of various studies in stakeholder management that these studies focused mainly on stakeholder identification like Smith and Love (2004) or Newcombe's (2003) stakeholder influence analysis. Karlsen (2008) considers identification of stakeholders and analyzing the stakeholders as the most important two stages of stakeholder management, while Young (2006) considers gathering information about stakeholders as the most important. Overall, there seems to be a need for a structured approach to find out the most important aspects of stakeholder management.

Stakeholder Relationship Management

In this regard, Goyder's (1999) view has a new and important dimension. According to him, "A business which better understands the needs of those with whom it has a relationship, and which better understands what they regard as value will survive in a turbulent world". The same point is expressed by Rowley (1997) who concentrated in his work on the network of stakeholder relationships. He pointed out that stakeholder relations are always dynamic and in a constant state of flux. The attitudes and actions of stakeholders may change at different stages. The dynamic nature of the stakeholder relationships is mentioned in a few other research works also (Rowley, 1997; Bronn

and Bronn, 2003; McVea and Freeman, 2005; and Boutilier, 2009). They all have stated that organizations must address stakeholder expectations by engaging with stakeholders. The idea of "paying attention to key stakeholder relationships" has been a major theme in many research works in strategic management beginning with Freeman (1999). Aaltonen *et al.* (2008) state that the key issue in project stakeholder management is management of the relationships between the project team and its stakeholders.

Project relationships are those relationships that occur between the project manager and the project's stakeholders as well as those that occur among the project stakeholders themselves. Project relationships are a network which comprises all relationships within and around the project. These are called the project environment or a sphere of support and influence which needs to be managed for the very existence and success of the project (Briner *et al.*, 1996; Freeman, 1999; and Bourne and Walker, 2003).

In the process of managing stakeholders and delivering value to them, it is important to properly manage the stakeholder relationships. Managing relationships within and around any project activity includes balancing the conflicting needs and expectations of various stakeholders (Bourne, 2016). First of all, legitimate and valid stakeholders need to be identified and after that their specific influence and power in the context of the project needs to be understood to manage their potential impact on the organization's work and effects of that work (Bourne, 2016). Effective relationships with an organization's entire network of stakeholders are essential for the long-term survival of the organization itself and the success of the project organizations operating within it (Post *et al.*, 2002). These relationships must be managed in ways that best meet both stakeholder needs and expectations and the needs of the organization.

Role of Communication in Stakeholder Relationship Management

Burnside-Lawry (2011) and Bakens *et al.* (2005) have pointed out that building positive organization-stakeholder relationships requires effective organization-stakeholder communication. Young (2006) in his work on stakeholder management asserts that "the key to good stakeholder management is effective communication". The point that 'communication' is an important factor in stakeholder relationship management is confirmed in many studies (Jergeas *et al.*, 2000; Bakens *et al.*, 2005; Young, 2006; Karlsen, 2008; and Olander and Landin, 2008).

PMI (2004) defines project stakeholder management as "the systematic identification, analysis and planning of actions to communicate with and influence stakeholders". Rowlinson and Cheung (2008) consider that the success of stakeholder relationship management is contingent upon a well-defined communication strategy, supported by structured facilitation of relationship activities. They also point out that relationship management is useful for enhancing project performance and client satisfaction.

According to Bourne (2009), while delivering strategic or tactical value to the stakeholders, robust processes and practices to manage relationships with stakeholders through targeted communication in the form of regular reports, meetings, and

presentations are required. She adds that value to the stakeholders is also delivered by managing the expectations of all stakeholders with reference to *what* is delivered to them as well as *when* and *how* it is delivered. This can be managed well through effective communication.

Flow of correct and timely information in a well-structured manner makes the project team efficient and the processes start to produce in time that affects the project's outcome positively. Stakeholder communication management is necessary for the beginning and progress of any project; it simultaneously addresses relations and motivation of the project team. Naqvi *et al.* (2011) state that the effectiveness in stakeholder communication management is critical for the project's success. According to them, the communication amongst stakeholders, including the project team, is an ongoing activity that needs to be maintained throughout the entire lifecycle of the project with due care and responsibility. The study by Naqvi *et al.* (2011) concludes that project managers should define and implement a formal communication framework to involve all external and internal stakeholders of the project.

Thus, it is clear from literature that to manage stakeholder relationships effectively, right strategies should be formed and implemented to have a positive influence on stakeholders and also to minimize their negative influence. Every stakeholder's positive or negative influence depends on situation and the issues at hand. But the support of the positive stakeholder can be sustained and the support of the negative stakeholder can be obtained through better communication. In fact, in this case, communication is a key tool available to manage relationships.

Objective

Not many research works are available in literature which study stakeholder management from this point of view. The objective of this study is to fill this gap in literature and explore the use of effective communication in stakeholder relationship management. The aim is also to find out a methodological approach and a framework to use communications as an effective tool for managing successful stakeholder relationships at all levels.

Data and Methodology

Considering the objectives, the study was conducted in two phases.

First Phase

The first phase consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with experienced industry professionals who had practical experience in the stakeholder management area and thus had a better understanding of the issues related to stakeholder relationship management and its implications.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 industry professionals who had more than 10 years' experience in stakeholder management area and had worked

in different roles in projects, i.e., client, consultant, contractor, etc. These experts were selected from four main sectors: (a) IT, (b) Construction, (c) Power, and (d) Manufacturing. This ensured the representation of major project organizations to have a balanced view on the issue. The aim of the interviews was to identify the actual role of communication and its practical usage in stakeholder relationship management. The interview participants were asked to answer a few related questions based on their experience in a semi-structured interview approach. The interview questions included but were not limited to the following questions:

- Who in your opinion are the most important stakeholders in case of the industry in which you are working?

- To what extent managing stakeholder relationships is important for the success of a project?

- What are the typical problems observed in managing stakeholder relationships in projects?

- In your opinion, can effective communication management, if implemented as a systematic process, serve as a tool to manage stakeholder relationships in a better way?

- In which different ways can such communications management process help in successful project stakeholder relationship management?

To find out and corroborate meaning from the responses received, content analysis method, as suggested in the work of Chinyio and Akintoye (2008) was used. After understanding the importance and key issues in stakeholder relationship management, the responses to the last question about the ways in which communications can help in creating value in the process of stakeholder relationship management, were analyzed in depth.

Second Phase

The second phase of the study consisted of preparing and conducting a questionnaire survey with the objective of further exploration and validation of major applications of communication management in stakeholder relationship management (Questions are tabulated later in Table 2). After synthesizing the responses received from interview participants, an initial version of the survey questionnaire was developed. A pilot study was conducted to find out the aptness, inclusiveness and practical aspects of the questionnaire. The suggestions of the pilot survey participants were included in the final questionnaire. Before finalizing it, the main points were scrutinized again on the basis of the literature review conducted. The survey questionnaire tried to understand the importance of communication in various aspects of stakeholder relationship management on the basis of the responses received from the survey participants. The questionnaire was prepared according to a five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = somewhat agree; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree.

The survey was conducted across India and the survey respondents were a mix of assistant project managers and project managers from construction, IT, power and manufacturing sectors. It was also ensured to have representatives from all project types of organizations, i.e., client, contractor, consultant, etc. The details of the survey respondents' profile are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Survey Respondents' Profile	
Work Experience of the Respondents	5-20 years
Industry Type	IT Projects – 32, Construction – 39, Manufacturing – 31, Power – 18
Role of the Organization in the Project	Client – 32, Contractor – 52, Consultants – 36

A total of 207 copies of the questionnaire were circulated to potential respondents, out of which, 132 responses were received. Some response sheets were incomplete and hence were not considered. In all, 120 questionnaires were complete and usable for analysis and the same were considered for analysis. The response rate was 64%. Considering the fact that the participants were from varied industries and working in busy project schedule, the response rate was satisfactory. Out of the 120, 52 respondents were from contractor organizations, 32 from client organizations and 36 were from consultant organizations. Many respondents had worked earlier in other types of organizations also.

The survey responses were analyzed through statistical analysis software, SPSS. One sample *t*-test was conducted for the response set to compare the mean differences and also to understand the relative importance of the various ways in which communication could be used to manage the stakeholder relationship management. Considering the results of this test, and the responses of the interview participants, one framework to manage stakeholder relationships during various stages of the project through effective communication practices, is suggested.

Results and Discussion

Results of the Interviews with the Industry Experts

The results of the interviews with industry professionals reveal that a majority of the respondents were unanimous about the importance of stakeholder management in the project success. After the analysis of participants' responses for question no. 3 related to problems in managing stakeholder relationships, the following problems were discovered.

Major Problems in Managing Stakeholder Relationships

The main issues according to the interview participants in managing stakeholder relations were:

• Information distortion

• Delay in information

- Miscommunication between important stakeholders
- Conflicts between the client and the contractors or internal conflicts amongst the project team
- Lack of single point of contact
- Lack of trust amongst the stakeholders

If we look at all these issues closely, all of them are related to communication. It is evident even from the literature review conducted that the problems in stakeholder relationship management are mostly due to wrong communication or lack of communication. Managing stakeholder relationships within and around any project activity includes balancing conflicting stakeholder needs and expectations. Stakeholders are central to success and failure in different ways, but the consistent theme is that "people are the key" and the key to successfully manage the people side of any endeavor is through communication (Bourne, 2009).

The next two important questions asked to the participants were whether communications can serve as a tool to manage stakeholder relationships in a better way and in which different ways communication can help to create value in the stakeholder relationship management process. All participants agreed that to successfully manage project relationships, communication is of immense importance. They were of the opinion that effective communication not only facilitates better relations, but also helps in adding value to the entire process of stakeholder management. When asked about the ways in which communication can be utilized to create value in the stakeholder relationship management, the interview participants suggested a few key points which were later validated through the questionnaire survey.

The main areas wherein communication could be used in stakeholder relationship management were:

- Managing stakeholder expectations
- Managing stakeholder engagements
- To facilitate project monitoring and control
- To overcome resistance to change
- For better performance of the project team
- As a tool for risk management
- For effective project leadership
- A link between projects and organizational strategy
- To facilitate project operations
- Building long-term relationships

Results of the Phase 2

The aim of the questionnaire survey was to further analyze the role of communication in stakeholder relationship management and to explore the validity and the relative importance of various ways in which communication could be used on the basis of interview participants' responses. On the basis of the points derived from interview responses, a total of 15 questions were prepared which were oriented towards understanding the role of communication in stakeholder relationship management, usage of communication in various aspects of stakeholder relationship management and also to know about the current status of stakeholder relationship management practices in the organizations.

One sample t test was conducted to check the significance and relative importance of these aspects in stakeholder relationship management. The results of the same are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: One-Sample Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Importance of Stakeholder Relationship Management	120	4.6417	0.48152
Awareness in Organization About Stakeholder Relationship Management	120	3.8417	0.48500
Effectiveness of Existing Stakeholder Relationship Policies	120	3.2833	0.59668
Role of Communication in Stakeholder Relationship Management	120	4.8083	0.39526
Communication and Stakeholder Expectations	120	4.5750	0.49642
Communication and Stakeholder Engagement	120	4.7667	0.42473
Inefficiency in Communication and Stakeholder Engagement	120	4.6000	0.54077
Role of Communication in Facilitating Project Monitoring and Control	120	4.0583	0.45459
Role of Communication in Overcoming Resistance to Change	120	4.3083	0.51524
Role of Internal Communication in Better Performance of Project Team	120	4.7750	0.41933
Communication as a Tool for Risk Management	120	3.6167	0.53740
Role of Communication in Preparing Project Leadership	120	3.9000	0.39747
Communication as a Link Between Projects and Organizational Strategy	120	4.4000	0.49195
Role of Communication in Facilitating Project Operations	120	4.1250	0.33211
Effective Communication and Long-Term Relationships	120	4.5833	0.51177

Table 3: One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 0					
	t	**df**	**Sig. (2-Tailed)**	**Mean Difference**	**95% Confidence Interval of the Difference**	
					Lower	**Upper**
Importance of Stakeholder Relationship Management	105.596	119	0.000	4.64167	4.5546	4.7287
Awareness in Organization About Stakeholder Relationship Management	86.770	119	0.000	3.84167	3.7540	3.9293
Effectiveness of Existing Stakeholder Relationship Management Policies	60.279	119	0.000	3.28333	3.1755	3.3912
Role of Communication in Stakeholder Relationship Mgt.	133.260	119	0.000	4.80833	4.7369	4.8798
Communication and Stakeholder Expectations	100.957	119	0.000	4.57500	4.4853	4.6647
Communication and Stakeholder Engagement	122.941	119	0.000	4.76667	4.6899	4.8434
Inefficiency in Communication and Stakeholder Engagement	93.182	119	0.000	4.60000	4.5023	4.6977
Role of Communication in Facilitating Project Monitoring and Control	97.795	119	0.000	4.05833	3.9762	4.1405
Role of Communication in Overcoming Resistance to Change	91.598	119	0.000	4.30833	4.2152	4.4015
Internal Communication for Better Performance of Project Team	124.740	119	0.000	4.77500	4.6992	4.8508
Communication as a Tool for Risk Management	73.723	119	0.000	3.61667	3.5195	3.7138
Role of Communication in Preparing Project Leadership	107.485	119	0.000	3.90000	3.8282	3.9718
Communication as a Link Between Projects and Organizational Strategy	97.976	119	0.000	4.40000	4.3111	4.4889
Role of Communication in Facilitating Project Operations	136.062	119	0.000	4.12500	4.0650	4.1850
Effective Communication and Long-Term Relationships	98.107	119	0.000	4.58333	4.4908	4.6758

The following major inferences could be drawn from the results of the two phases of the study:

- Importance of Stakeholder Relationship Management in Project Success: This factor received a very high rating, i.e., mean score of 4.6417. It implies that the participants strongly agree with the point that stakeholder relationship management is very crucial in success or failure of projects. To garner the support of the stakeholders, it is important to manage cordial relationship with them.

- Awareness in Organizations About Practices for Good Stakeholder Relationship Management: The mean score for this point is 3.8417. This indicates that there is very less awareness in the project organizations surveyed about the good practices to be implemented for stakeholder relationship management.

- Effectiveness of Existing Stakeholder Relationship Management Policies: The ratings received for this factor show a very low mean score, i. e., 3.2833. This clearly indicates that the existing stakeholder relationship management policies in the surveyed project organizations are not very effective.

- Communications Play a Crucial Role in Stakeholder Relationship Management: The participants have strongly validated the point that communications play a crucial role in stakeholder relationship management. The mean score for the point is 4.8083. It is the highest rating amongst all 15 points. It proves the fact that effective communication can definitely help the organizations in creating value in the stakeholder relationship management process.

- Communication as a Tool to Manage Stakeholder Expectations: The factor received a high ranking with the mean score 4.5750 which implies that participants strongly agree with the point that communication can be used effectively to manage stakeholder expectations. When we think about developing healthy relationships with the stakeholders, understanding the expectations of important stakeholders is very difficult but at the same time a very essential task for the success of the project. Communication can serve as an effective tool to manage the stakeholder expectations. The interview participants for this study were of the opinion that conducting regular meetings with stakeholders, asking them about their needs, preparing documentation to understand stakeholder expectations from public records or reports, conducting surveys to know customer needs, etc. are some of the ways in which communication can help the organizations to understand stakeholder expectations in a better way.

- Effective Communication to Manage Stakeholder Engagement: The point is validated by the questionnaire survey participants, with the mean score of 4.7667 which indicates strong agreement. It can be inferred from the results

that effective communications can help the organizations to manage stakeholder engagements in a better way. Stakeholder engagement functions related to flow of information across various channels of organizational communication need to be proactively managed by the organizations. According to the interview participants of the study, through the means of effective communication, the stakeholder's perception about the fulfillment of their needs could be managed, thus making the stakeholders more engaged and contribute more in the project activities.

- Inefficiency in Communication Affects Stakeholder Engagement Adversely: The survey participants' rating for this construct is 4.6000 which validates the point that inefficiency in communication affects stakeholder engagement adversely. Most of the participants highlighted the point that there are problems in stakeholder engagement and expectation management due to inefficient internal as well as external communication on the part of project teams. It is the main cause of project conflicts also.

- Role of Communication in Facilitating Project Monitoring and Control Through Stakeholder Relationship Management: The mean score for this construct is 4.0583. This proves that communication is an important tool to manage the upward, inward, downward, horizontal and external flow of information across the entire network of stakeholders. Thus, if the communications are managed effectively, a very broad spectrum of stakeholder relations is automatically managed. By managing these, it facilitates the project monitoring and control activities as all monitoring and control activities are managed through communications.

- Positive Communication Helps the Project Teams to Overcome the Resistance to Change: The point is validated with the mean score of 4.3083. During the close out or hand over stages of the project, it is important for the project teams to effectively manage the change situations. There is a chance that external stakeholders, i.e., client, end-users or customers may not accept the change brought in by the project and there are possibilities of resistance from them. In this situation, as per the opinion of the interview participants of this study, positive communication could be used as a very effective tool to manage the resistance generated due to change situations. It can reduce the resistance and generate a cooperative environment amongst all stakeholders by maintaining positive relations.

- Effective Internal Communication Facilitates Better Performance of Project Team: The point received a high mean score of 4.7750 which implies that internal communication amongst the team members should be strong. This helps to develop the relationships of project's internal stakeholders. The internal communication should be well planned and the information should

flow at the right time to the right person. Lack of proper communication or miscommunication decreases team morale and trust among the project team members, which ultimately affects the outcome of the project. One of the IT professionals interviewed for the study said that the efficiency in internal communication fosters robust relations amongst the project team, helps to remove internal conflicts and boosts the morale and motivation of team members.

- Use of Communication as a Tool for Risk Management: The point is validated with a moderate mean score, i.e., 3.6167. Communication can play a big role in managing risk by reducing the negative influence on the stakeholders by modifying their perceptions through proper communication and also by increasing the positive influence through right messages. This proactive risk management would be extremely good to develop long-term relations with the stakeholders. Thus, communication can be used as a tool for risk management and hence creating positive stakeholder relations through that.

- Communication Prepares and Helps Project Leadership in Downward Stakeholder Relationship Management: The point is validated by the survey participants with 3.9000 mean score. The projects have a complex stakeholder structure. When we think about managing stakeholder relationships, along with external stakeholders, internal stakeholders, particularly, downward stakeholder relationship management is important. This complex structure affects the dynamics of the team and at times even disturbs its balance and affects the performance. To ensure the best use of these resources, the project manager must understand how to lead and how to motivate the team when problems occur. For effective stakeholder relationship management, it is important that the leaders are effective in motivating, inspiring, and developing the team. The leadership also includes decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution, planning and allocating resources, conducting stakeholder engagement activities, etc. According to the participants of this study, all these functions of leadership, in managing downward stakeholders, could be well executed through efficient communication. Communication prepares and helps the leadership in managing especially the downward stakeholder relations.

- Communication Serves as a Link Between Projects and Organizational Strategy: The point is validated with a high mean score of 4.4000. Effective communication serves the projects in many ways. All important functions of the projects are carried out through communication. By becoming a tool to manage stakeholder relationships in a proactive way, it helps the organizations to execute its strategies in a better way. Efficient communication is not only the distribution of information amongst all stakeholders but creates a 'benefit to all' kind of environment amongst stakeholders, thus facilitating the management to achieve organizational objectives. Hence, the

participants believed that it serves as a link between the projects and the organizational strategy.

- Communication Facilitates Project Operations: The point received the mean score of 4.1250. Inefficiency in communication may affect the project monitoring and control. It creates obstructions in stakeholders' support and perceptions if not managed properly. The study results show that communication facilitates project operations.

- Effective Communication Helps to Build Long-Term Relationships with Stakeholders: The construct received strong agreement from the participants, with the mean score of 4.5833, thus validating the point. To sum up all the points mentioned above, it can be said that effective communication helps the organizations to build long-term and sustainable relationships with the stakeholders.
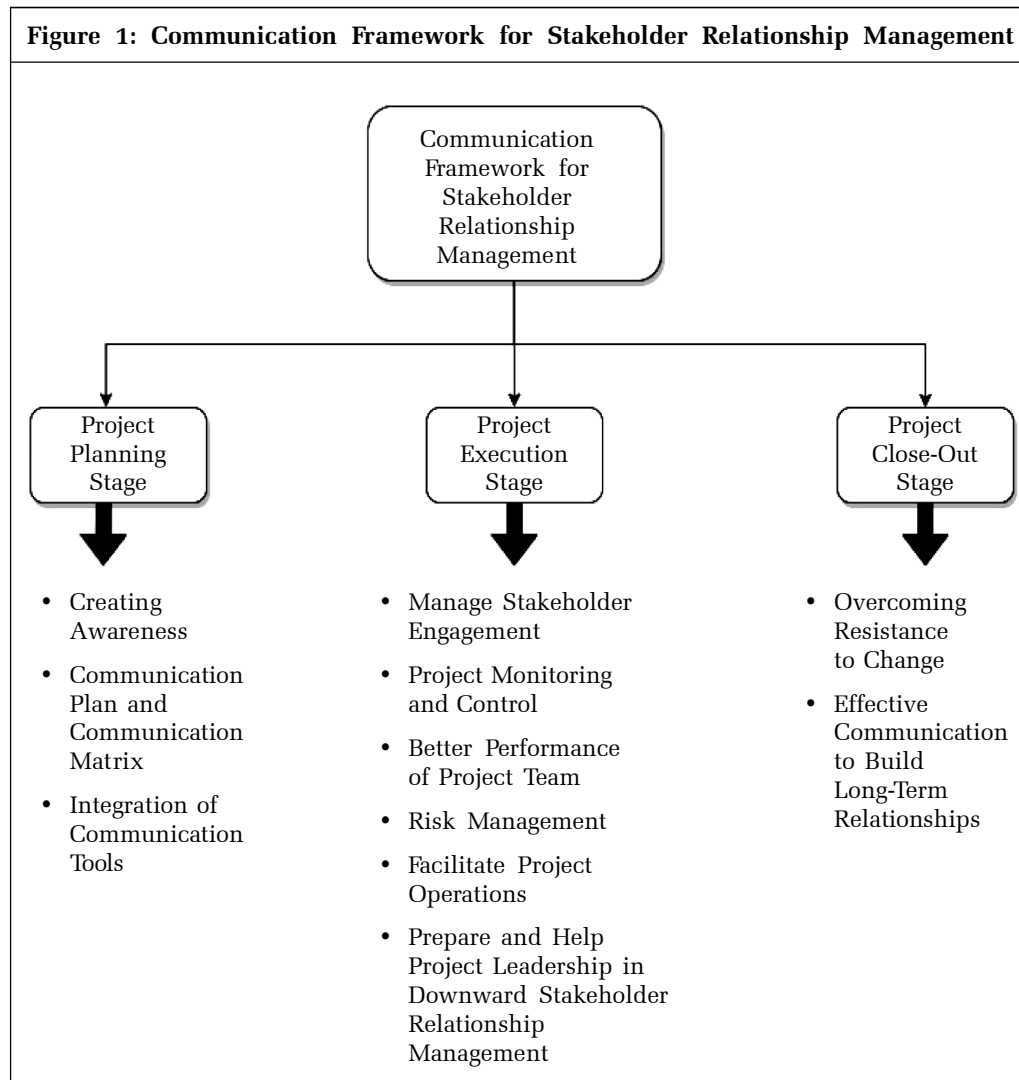
Apart from this, the 'One Sample t-Test' results, as presented in Table 3, indicate that the mean difference in all 15 points of the test is significant at 0.000 level and with 95% confidence interval of the difference. Thus, the results of the first phase of the study, i.e., the points derived from the interviews with the industry experts, were validated in the comprehensive questionnaire survey. Overall, the survey results show that four major factors, i.e., Importance of Stakeholder Relationship Management for Project Success, Role of Communication in Stakeholder Relationship Management, Communication as a Tool to Manage Stakeholder Engagement, and Effective Internal Communication Facilitates Better Performance of Project Team, received highest mean scores and were perceived to be the most important by the survey participants. This asserts the need for preparing deliberate strategies for effective communication management to engage stakeholders, to bring effectiveness in project team's performance and to manage the stakeholder relationships at all levels.

Communication Framework for Stakeholder Relationship Management

The above analysis asserts the point that effective communication management serves as a key tool to manage stakeholder relationships efficiently. It also indicates that stakeholder relationships are crucial for the successful delivery of the project and its results. Building and maintaining healthy and long-term stakeholder relations requires that the stakeholders are engaged, supportive and involved in the project activities. Appropriate communication can bring value to the stakeholder management process by nurturing positive perceptions and managing the stakeholders' expectations in an appropriate way.

The study indicates that for effective stakeholder relationship management through communication management, a well-planned strategy is needed. If we follow a methodological approach and planned efforts dedicated to achieve certain objectives

related to stakeholder relationship management, communication could definitely be used efficiently to foster and maintain robust stakeholder relationships. Hence, based on the results of the two-phased study, i.e., interviews and questionnaire survey, conducted for this research work, a framework or a methodological approach is suggested as part of the conclusion for developing and managing stakeholder relationships in a systematic way (Figure 1). The usage of communication during various stages of project implementation as derived from the study results is given here in the form of a framework associating them with various project stages, which could be implemented as a strategy during the planning stage and also at operational level while executing the project. If each step of the framework is followed and then monitored systematically during the entire life cycle of the project, communication can definitely create value and work as an efficient tool to manage stakeholder relationships.

Figure 1: Communication Framework for Stakeholder Relationship Management

Communication Framework for Stakeholder Relationship Management

Project Planning Stage

- Creating Awareness
- Communication Plan and Communication Matrix
- Integration of Communication Tools

Project Execution Stage

- Manage Stakeholder Engagement
- Project Monitoring and Control
- Better Performance of Project Team
- Risk Management
- Facilitate Project Operations
- Prepare and Help Project Leadership in Downward Stakeholder Relationship Management

Project Close-Out Stage

- Overcoming Resistance to Change
- Effective Communication to Build Long-Term Relationships

Project Planning Stage

a. Creating awareness in the project organizations about the importance of stakeholder relationship management and the use of communication for long-term stakeholder relationship management is the first step. This awareness should be created not only at the top management level but also at the level of project manager and all internal layers of project implementation so that a culture of targeted communication develops in the organization.

b. Preparation of communication plan and communication matrix to manage stakeholder expectations and stakeholder engagements is the second step. Communication plan should be prepared in such a way that it would identify all important stakeholders and prepare a strategy to manage their expectations and perceptions through positive communication. Stakeholder engagement and involvement through right information to right people at the right time, should also be planned.

c. Integration of communication tools, like well-drafted and clear documentation, planned meetings with stakeholders, reporting formats, flow of information to various internal and external stakeholders, etc., in organizational strategy is the third step. Thus, communication can be a link between project implementation and organizational strategy and organizational objectives.

Project Execution Stage

a. Using communication to manage stakeholder engagement during the entire project execution.

b. Communication efficiency for project monitoring and control.

c. Effective internal communication for better performance of project team.

d. Communication as a tool for risk management.

e. Communication to facilitate project operations.

f. Positive communication to prepare and help project leadership in downward stakeholder relationship management.

Project Close-Out Stage

a. Using communication to overcome resistance to change.

b. Effective communication to build long-term relationships with stakeholders.

As explained earlier, communication management can be used as a strategic tool to manage stakeholder relations in a systematic way at each project stage. The framework tries to include maximum challenges related to stakeholder expectations and engagement during all project stages. If implemented in a planned manner, the organization's stakeholder relationship management would be easily implemented.

Conclusion

The main contribution of the study lies in identification of various critical stages of project implementation wherein communication management can be used as a planned process to successfully manage stakeholder expectations and perceptions which would ultimately benefit the organizations in many ways. This study concludes that though there is awareness about the importance of stakeholder relationship management in general, there is a lack of dedicated and planned efforts to manage these relationships which are the backbone of stakeholder management and are ultimately very important for the success of the project. The interview participants and questionnaire survey participants strongly agreed with the point that "communication plays a significant role in managing stakeholder relationships." They also agreed with the point that inefficiency in communication may adversely affect stakeholder engagement in the project. Most of the problems in the stakeholder relations derived from expert interviews indicate lack of communication or miscommunication issues.

The study would be useful to industry practitioners as the communication framework could be implemented for successful stakeholder relationship management. The contribution of the study is that it propounds a new and methodological approach to create value in the stakeholder relationship management area.

Limitations of the Study: The study includes inputs from four main project organizations, i.e., IT, Construction, Manufacturing and Power; in future, it could be conducted with a larger sample size and in multiple projects. The framework also could be expanded and validated further including more aspects of the project life cycle.◉

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