Collaborative Communication: Six Building Blocks for Conversations That Make Things Happen

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Introduction

Project teams exist to get things done. Conversations that make things happen are vitally important to both project managers and organizations in today’s newer, flatter, and networked organizational settings. From a communications systems perspective, project teams are essentially a sustained network of conversations between human beings around a set of shared commitments, actions, and results. Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more persons to achieve common goals. This paper is devoted to achieving a better understanding of how the structure and tactics of conversations—the building blocks of collaborative conversations—lead to committed action by others in achieving collaboration.

The network of collaborative conversations is as much a part of the core project management process as scope management, quality management, or project procurement management. In fact, thoughtful conversations around questions that matter and that result in action might be the core process in project management. People learn together in conversation as they work together. All project managers have experienced conversations that had a powerful impact in catalyzing action. What sets apart these collaborative conversations from the many exchanges that occur on a daily basis? A review of conceptual frameworks and research identified six critical building blocks that distinguish collaborative conversations.

In everyday conversation the words cooperation, coordination, and collaboration are sometimes used interchangeably. However, collaboration refers to a more durable and pervasive relationship where people and resources, previously separated by organizational and reporting relationships, are pooled and products shared (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Partners in collaboration find themselves in a dynamic relationship where communication channels are operating on many levels. It is no surprise then that a review of research literature on factors influencing successful collaboration found that “collaborative group members interact often, update one another, discuss issues openly, convey all necessary information to one another and to people outside the group” (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992).

This paper focuses on the components of collaborative conversations to help project managers provide critical links among people, ideas, and information necessary for project success. Using the six building blocks will help project managers in a variety of PMBOK® Guide skill areas including quality assurance and control (8.2; 8.3), team development (9.3), communications planning (10.1), information distribution (10.2), and risk response development (11.3). Like the value of regular oil changes in maintaining an automobile, developing skill in collaborative conversations can serve as a lubricant that allows the process of project management to keep working without jamming.

Frame the Agenda as Collaborative

Conversations that lead to collaboration begin with a collaborative agenda. Project managers implicitly or explicitly frame the intent of a conversation by the ways they communicate their agenda. Getting results in communication requires planning, and the first building block is planning the agenda. Through agenda setting project managers can influence the perception of various project stakeholders regarding issues and ideas worthy of attention. In a project management environment, many important conversations take place in semiformal or informal surroundings. Agendas help listeners distinguish purposeful talk from social conversation. Social conversation is valuable, especially in enhancing goodwill and learning about the nature and interests of the other party. However, communicating an expressed purpose for people coming together, an agenda, clearly signals that results are expected.

The place to start in influencing others is to consider the other party as a potential ally, not adversary (Cohen & Bradford, 1989). Assuming that even a person with a history of difficult or resistant behavior is a potential ally makes it easier to understand that person’s world, increasing the chance of discovering mutual benefits from collaboration. The range of mutual benefits in an agenda for collaboration may relate to mission, goals, structure, responsibilities, communication, authority, accountability, resources and rewards (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). The overall theme of an agenda needs to be that more will be accomplished jointly than could be achieved individually. However attractive collaboration may seem in the abstract, the actual task of securing resources and sharing authority and accountability presents elements of a competitive situation. Consequently, extra effort is required to communicate an agenda that is perceived by others as collaborative.

Collaborative agendas convey an understanding and willingness to engage in an exchange relationship.
An agenda promoting exchanges favorable for both parties expresses concern and value for both substantive and relationship outcomes (Savage et al., 1989). Conversations conveying an agenda with an exclusive focus on a group's substantive outcomes may work in short-term, less-complex project management situations where you have substantial power. However, building a trusting collaboration will require communicating that the relationship outcome of conversations carries virtually equal weight with the substantive outcomes. Collaborative agendas include the other party's interests, needs, values, and outcomes. In building an action agenda, collaboration is enhanced when parties engage in alternating conversations expressing interests, needs, desires, and demands (Pruit & Rubin, 1986). A collaborative agenda gives as much weight to the needs and desired outcomes of the other party as you give to your own actions and outcomes.

**Balance Advocacy With Inquiry**

Collaboration requires room to “think out loud.” Conversations with some people follow the destructive pattern of after they have stated their important points, they adopt a “let’s stop talking now and get to work” mentality. Project managers are trained and experienced in being assertive, forceful, and results-oriented problem solvers. They know the value of pushing their point of view. As projects become more complex, getting results requires arriving at new insights—which is learning. Too often in striving for results through conversation our thinking processes move too quickly in advancing and supporting our perspective, pushing out room for inquiry.

Peter Senge and his colleagues at MIT’s Sloan School of Management have confirmed the centrality of collaborative conversations as they have studied how learning actually takes place in an organization (Senge, 1990; 1994). A second building block is promoting learning or discovery of what is possible by balancing advocacy with inquiry. In balancing advocacy and inquiry, “we lay out our reasoning and then encourage others to challenge us” (Senge, 1994). The trick is to make your thinking more visible by offering “Here is my view, how I arrived at it, and how does it sound to you?” Conversations that result in learning lie at the heart of problem solving, and learning requires skillful use of inquiry and listening. The quality of our learning process is closely linked with the quality of the questions we ask. Focusing on essential questions helps us to challenge our underlying assumptions and avoid falling prey to groupthink.

Inviting inquiry requires genuine listening. Tension is a normal part of many project management conversations, and often that tension prevents us from really listening to the other person. Instead of listening, we begin to form a response well before the other person is finished. When our opinions, ideas, inclinations, and impulses dominate a conversation, we hardly listen at all. That is why an important ground rule for a different approach to business communication, dialogue, is not to dogmatically fight or “kiss off” someone else’s point of view but to “listen without resistance” (Isaacs, 1999). A learning conversation is based on the realization that no single point of view will be totally correct, and each party to the conversation must help fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

**Incorporate the Language of Evaluation**

A mistaken notion is that telling people what they want to hear will promote collaboration. An uneasy piece of a conversation often deals with breakdowns and barriers. However, the art of articulating disturbances, along with the skill of listening for disturbances, can be very powerful. A third building block is using the language of evaluation to point the way to the need for action. Evaluation involves assessments and assertions that help others interpret reality and draw conclusions from evidence and assumptions about a situation. Assessments and assertions create much of the everyday world of project management. A successful Boston-based company with decades of experience in project management and the information technology industry has found the greatest worth as a project manager is in understanding what is going on and then taking the necessary actions (Plummer, 1995). Conversations about what is going on here rely on the language of evaluation.

An important source of power for conversations is communicating a performance gap. Shared perception of a gap between actual and desired states of performance, especially if it implies failure, is a potent catalyst for action. Skill in the language of evaluation helps a project manager create awareness of the importance of a performance gap and recognition that reexamination is needed of what we thought was working. Most important is skill in discourse concerning measurements. Collaboration is not about “small talk.” People who are sloppy or vague in their language concerning evaluation and performance risk being seen as a time waster. Conversations for evaluation benefit from being structured and driven by a concern for the facts, for finding out “what is going on here.” These conversations often involve emotions. It is important to acknowledge emotions, but skillful conversations focus on moving the attention to valid and useful data for pinpointing areas needing action.

Conversations that include evaluation can reinforce conversations for learning, but the two conversations are different. While learning opens new possibilities, evaluation is about defining specific shortcomings in meeting standards. The language of evaluation is less “free form” and is based on some objective criteria. The use of objective criteria in promoting agreement has been a cornerstone of the Harvard Project on Negotiation and has consistently been useful in resolving disagreements (Fisher & Ury, 1992).

**Sell Issues**

A fourth building block is issue selling where one of more members of a project team must gain the commitment of others.
Collaboration does not result from some preestablished procedure. The prospective individual or group must be stimulated, nurtured, and directed. Action can often be traced to a person who develops and communicates an issue. A project manager or member of the project team shares his or her commitment relevant to the issue and sells another person or group on the idea that their needs, wants or values are also related to resolving the issue. Members of the extended project team such as management and customers need to be informed of important issues and be able to sort and process issues effectively. Issue selling is a critical process that prevents important stakeholders from being isolated from project developments. Project managers who can articulate why others ought to attend to issues that they think are critical to the project’s outcome will be seen as having leadership skills. So, the communication challenge is not whether to use issue selling but how to engage in it successfully.

Political scientists have identified three prerequisites for an issue to obtain access to a political agenda: (1) widespread awareness, (2) shared concern that some type of action is required, and (3) a shared perception that the matter is an appropriate concern of some group and falls within the bounds of its authority (Jones, 1970). One framework for issue selling (Ancona et al., 1999) identifies an array of tactical choices including bundling one issue with another important issue, framing the issue as an opportunity or threat, involving stakeholders, using a formal or informal approach, and timing. Rather than sell an issue as an isolated concern, a project manager can bundle a new issue with existing issues where collaborative efforts are under way. The new issue gains attention and support by association. Framing an issue as an opportunity rather than an obstacle or barrier is more likely to promote collaboration. Project managers also need to be opportunistic about timing. Some issues need to be kept “in the desk drawer” to be raised when the time is right. For a difficult issue, the right time for gaining collaboration is when a sense of momentum has been established or when meeting a critical path milestone or deadline is imminent. Another tactical consideration is using an informal approach. Through informal conversations a project manager has more opportunity to lobby for an issue that, in the formal organizational meeting, may not be considered ready for a hearing. Through informal conversations the issue can be “sharpened” by discovering those aspects that can be highlighted to gain attention and support for action.

Communicate Promises

The fifth building block is the conversation of promises where words are converted to action so that the future matches what you say. Conversations about promises involve the language of commitment, credibility, and competence. Competence and follow-through are two of a project manager’s most potent sources of authority (Frame, 1994). In communicating promises, you are committed to performing the action and being held to account for producing the conditions of satisfaction as promised. You’re telling the person or group that “you can depend on me.” Repeated delivery on your promises in a project management environment is the most critical evidence used by others to assess competence.

Capitalize on the Reciprocal Nature of Collaboration

Finally, the sixth building block recognizes that collaborative conversations have a reciprocal quality about them. The way influence is acquired without formal authority is through the “law of reciprocity”—the almost universal belief that people should be paid back for what they do (Cohen & Bradford, 1989). In a relationship when our expectations of the other party are reciprocated, a self-fulfilling prophecy or “trust cycle” (Haney, 1986) can be established. Conversations that lead to collaboration and action elicit interpersonal cooperation and trust, which support a constructive cycle for continued growth. Success breeds success. The greater the extent to which a person seeking to influence another has successfully worked with that person and created trust, the easier the exchange of resources will be. Without either party actually saying, “If you continue to help me, I’ll continue to help you,” the mutual expectations can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of increased trust and skill in using the other building blocks which powers an even higher level of performance and results. One recommended strategy is to encourage momentum by having earlier conversations about issues that are easier to resolve so a solid foundation of cooperation can be established by the time more difficult issues arise (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). The more frequent and recent such successes have been, the greater the faith that these successes mean future problem solving will be worthwhile.

The payoff from investing in collaborative style conversations will be more creative and insightful realizations about complex, uncertain, and risky dimensions of a project and what action is necessary to keep the project moving toward success.

References


