

# **Rowing Together – Communication Roadblocks between PM’s and Testers**

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## **1 Abstract**

Communication between project managers and testers can be challenging, even on the best projects. Project managers often comment on the “noise” created by testers, while testers comment they are frequently frustrated by their communication with project managers. Human nature plays a role in the communication breakdown, partnered with differences in goals, expectations and accountabilities.

This summary focuses on the observations of real-world experience in unmasking the communication roadblocks between project managers and testers often limiting the collaboration and contribution of the testing effort. The focus is on bridging the communication gap by assisting project managers in recognizing and deciphering the key information provided by testers; while also assisting testers in effectively communicating the needs, concerns and progress of the testing effort to ensure project managers and stakeholders make informed decisions.

## **2 Communication & Human Nature**

When two or more people communicate it is fascinating to observe and later examine the differences between the message intended by the sender and the message interpreted by the receiver. Try engaging your team in a simple exercise to represent this. Ask them to verbally respond to the following with the first word that comes to mind; Black, Up, Left, Night, Young.

In most cases the responses will be White, Down, Right, Day, Old. Interesting and a little disheartening when you consider the fact that even at the subconscious level the human brain is wired to translate the opposite of what we hear. Why does this disconnect in communication occur? What is the impact of the missed or misinterpreted message? The impact can be particularly problematic when the dynamics of a project team rely heavily on the success of communication and collaboration such as within the agile development methodology. The same can be true for the communication of the testing effort to project stakeholders. This area of project communication is often fraught with roadblocks that may result in misinformed stakeholder decision making.

Over the years there has been endless research and studies on communication and human nature in an effort to understand and improve our communication. Many of us have learned the value of good listening and paraphrasing skills to improve our communication skills. Our ability to apply these skills effectively is another story. However, there is often much more to consider when encountering communication challenges. Personality types, communication styles, mental models, to list a few are other areas with significant impact on the effectiveness communication. Taking the time to review and

leverage the extensive research in communications can be very valuable when encountering communication challenges.

### **3 Getting in the Same Boat**

On many projects it may feel as though project managers and testers are not in the same boat let alone rowing together. Test efforts can often feel as though they are a row boat behind a giant cruise ship, madly rowing and navigating the wake just to stay afloat.

The source of this disconnect is often in recognizing the alignment of the project manager’s and tester’s goals. One way of looking at this would be to say:

- the project manager’s goal is to achieve project completion on time and budget with an acceptable level of quality;
- the tester’s goal is to achieve an acceptable level of quality within the timeframe and budget allotted for project completion.

Both project managers and testers share a common goal in meeting stakeholder expectations and both are strategically balancing scope, timeline, budget, and quality on an ongoing basis.

Despite what some testers may feel, project managers are not tied to a bandwagon of pushing low quality products out the door just to meet timeline or budget. And to the surprise of some project managers, not all testers are carrying zero-defect clubs demanding never ending project extensions to accomplish that unattainable goal.

In order to get in the same boat and row together, project managers and testers need to share their understanding of the stakeholders’ goals and expectations and agree on their collaborative approach to achieving those. On many projects testers are limited to an awareness of detailed requirements skipping the overall stakeholder goals, a symptom of late engagement or not being engaged at the stakeholder level. Project managers need to know that a tester who is informed on stakeholder goals, which may or may not place quality high on the list, can effectively deliver to that. An example would be a project focused on the delivery of new market capability wherein the primary goal of the stakeholders is to be first to market. In this scenario a tester can be supportive of putting a less than ideal product out the door when they:

- have the opportunity to qualify with stakeholders the desired and/or acceptable level of quality;
- are provided the opportunities to effectively report on the quality to ensure stakeholders are well informed; and
- understand the stakeholder commitment to follow on releases addressing remaining concerns.

There are obvious exceptions to releasing lower quality products, such as those products with risks of life threatening consequences, significant financial impacts, regulatory impacts, etc. The intent is to highlight the difference that can be made in the test approach and expected outcomes when the tester is informed on the stakeholder goals and expectations.

## **4 Sharing Valuable Information or Making Noise?**

Communication between project managers and their testers can often be problematic due to the frequency, content, medium, volume, etc. Project managers often comment on the dialogue from their testers with analogies to “lots of noise” and “too much fuss”. Project managers may feel the need to filter this information and communicate to their stakeholders only what they have interpreted to be valuable or crucial. Likewise testers often comment on the dialogue with their project managers as frustrating with an overwhelming lack of feeling understood and appreciated. Strong willed testers will persevere continuing to try and make headway with their message, sometimes with negative consequences. Less experienced, confident or persistent testers will simply give way and allow their project manager to gloss over or minimize concerns, requests, issues, etc.

The impact of these communication breakdowns can sometimes be minimal when the intended communication is not critical in nature. The opposite is also true where the communication roadblocks are preventing highly valuable information from being effectively understood and acted upon for the benefit of the project success and stakeholders.

## **5 Areas of Focus for Communicating the Test Effort**

It is important for testers to collaborate with project managers in defining the areas of focus in the communication of the testing effort early in the project. It is imperative to set expectations from both perspectives on what will be communicated in the definition, implementation and evaluation of the test effort. It is important to also consider the timing and frequency of the communication, the format, the audience and by whom the communication should be provided. Gaining consensus on what will be practical, valuable and critical to report on will pave the way for sharing this communication later in the project; limiting any surprises or concern over the communications when they occur.

## **6 Collaborative Solutions**

Even the best of projects are likely to encounter challenges which pose a risk to the project mandate either in the form of time, budget or quality. Often these challenges pose project impacts with a downstream effect on the test effort. Effective collaboration between project managers and testers can be invaluable in creatively developing solutions to minimize or mitigate the impact to the test effort. From the onset of the project this collaboration is important for defining, clarifying, problem solving, communicating, etc. the needs, concerns and progress of the testing effort.

### **6.1 Getting What You Need – Tester Perspective**

Even following the early consensus on what should be areas of focus for communication on the test effort, there are still potential challenges. Testers often comment on the effort to “sell” needs, concerns, and progress of the testing effort. To increase the effectiveness in the sell, testers need to keep the focus on achieving the stakeholder expectations. All efforts are geared to achieving these expectations and it is important to align the communication back to those expectations of the project. This can certainly be likened to the Counselor Sales Process, Wilson Learning - (Wilson Learning, 2009). In this sales process the stages are:

- Relating – Establishing Trust
- Discovering – Uncovering Needs and Motives
- Advocating – Solving Problems While Meeting Personal Motives
- Supporting – Process of Reassuring

As a tester joining a new project team, you are in the Relation stage and need to be focused on establishing trust with your project manager. Through this stage you want to establish the groundwork for the project manager to get to know you and learn the value you can bring them and to the project. The next stage you enter is the Discovery stage and your focus is on understanding the goals and expectations of the stakeholders for the project as a whole and then specifically for quality. As you move into the Advocating stage, your focus moves to how you will position the strategy, needs, concerns, etc of the test effort. The focus of the sell needs to be on what the problem is and highlight both the advantages and the benefits from the solution you are proposing. The advantage focusing on “How does it solve the problem (lack of time, resources, budget, quality, etc for the test effort)?” which is a task motivated solution. The second focus on is on benefit “What does it do for the project manager or stakeholders?” which is a personal motivator. In the last stage you have already successfully gained buy in to solution your problem, implemented that solution and you now need to follow up on the success in achieving the advantages and benefits you outlined.

To increase the effectiveness and likelihood of consensus in “selling” the needs of the test effort, it must come from the perspective of the advantages and then the benefits to the project manager and the stakeholders. In order to do that you must lay the groundwork in developing relationships, establishing trust, and understanding the needs and motives of the project manager and stakeholders.

## **6.2 Getting What You Need – PM Perspective**

Project managers need to keep in mind that testing efforts are more complex than may meet the eye. Many project managers simplify the test effort to the development of test cases from requirements and in turn the execution of those test cases in a predefined timeframe, often defined with little or no input from the test team. Highly effective test efforts have actively engaged testers from project inception through close with testers playing a key role in achieving project success. The role of the tester should not be added after the fact with the potential to recruit low cost or even unskilled resources. Once project managers understand the key role their testers can provide achieving project success they place a new level of expectation and reliance on them. Project managers with this understanding actively seek input from their testers placing increased value on the needs, concerns, and progress communication.

## **7 Key Success Factors to Facilitating Great Test Efforts**

There are many variables to the key success factors for facilitating great test efforts. However, from the perspective of communication between project manager and tester the key success factors include:

- building a collaborative partnership between the project manager and tester;

- tester’s awareness of stakeholder goals and expectations for the project and defining a test approach in alignment with achieving those goals;
- collaboratively defining early in the project the areas of focus for communication of the test effort; and
- the context for “selling” the needs of the testing effort needs to be aligned to the stakeholder goals and expectations; highlight advantages and benefits for the stakeholders.

## **8 References**

*Wilson Learning*. (2009). Retrieved April 30, 2009, from Wilson Learning Online:  
<http://wilsonlearning.com>