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By Steven Birmingham

"What is your primary means of communicating with stakeholders," I ask the students in my masters-level project management communications class. They come from diverse backgrounds. Some are veteran project managers with certifications and successful projects under their belt. Others are just beginning their project management careers. Despite this variety, their answer is nearly always unanimous: "email." This is not the answer I'm looking for.

At each class session, students share communication challenges and successes from the past week. Many stories involve never-ending email battles where a project manager isn't receiving the desired response. At the end of such stories, I ask the class how they would proceed. Often, their answers involve "send an email saying..."

Like my students, I, too, once relied almost exclusively on email for project communications. After a few too many email catastrophes, I had the good fortune of working with a communications coach who made me question some of my habits. Why did I continue to use email during conversations where it was clearly ineffective? Did email's convenience and low cost mean it should always be used to initiate communications? If the stimulus was an email, should the response always be in kind, or could a call or visit be a better choice?

I have posed these questions to my students many times over the years, to seminar audiences, and to corporate training classes. Each time, after a thorough discussion, we have concluded that people reach too quickly for email. Every communication has an underlying goal; sometimes that goal is better served by a visit, phone call, or meeting.

If the goal is to convince, email cannot rival the rich body language that can be brought to bear in person. If the goal is to clarify, email cannot compete with the phone's real-time capabilities, where listener and speaker can adjust their tone, pace, and content based on the counterparty's feedback. If the goal is to reach consensus, email will never allow a project manager to gauge the participants' facial expressions and head-nodding before asking for a vote. Does this mean email is not a valuable project communication tool? No.

Through trial and error, I have determined that email is often the most effective medium for achieving three particular goals:

- Providing information (“The budget is \$250,000”)
- Requesting information (“What is the budget?”)
- Requesting action (“Please send Joe the budget.”)

I have also determined through trial-and-error, that phone calls, visits, or meetings are usually more effective for achieving most other goals, including:

- Convincing
- Clarifying
- Building consensus
- Congratulating
- Discussing
- Creating
- Problem-solving
- Resolving controversies
- Conveying or receiving emotion

When communicating, I consider my goal and match the medium to that goal. If I need to provide a project update: email. If it’s convincing my boss to grant an exception: a visit. If I need to gauge the feelings of the project team: a meeting. When I receive an email, I no longer automatically click the “reply” button. Often, emails spawn phone calls, visits, or meetings. If I find myself in the middle of a chain of unproductive, or even destructive, emails, I walk away from the computer and choose another method to improve the situation.

Email is a powerful addition to the project manager’s toolbox. Used properly in appropriate situations, it can disseminate or gather information quickly and efficiently. Used inappropriately, it can cause confusion and frustration. This is the lesson I’ve learned the hard way and tried to teach my students.

What should be your primary means of communicating with stakeholders? Whichever medium works best to achieve your goals.

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Steven Birmingham teaches Professional Communications for I.T. Project Managers at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology. Over 10 years, he managed or participated in numerous projects as I.T. Director at a \$2 billion financial institution. He holds an. M.S.E. in the Management of Technology from the University of Pennsylvania and is a popular seminar speaker on the topics of communications and project management. He is a founding member of The Communication Gym. He can be reached at sbirmingham@harrisburgu.net

For Further Reading:

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