

# Project management for researchers and evaluators



## Strengthening team communication

Maintaining strong communication with our teams is one of the most important steps towards ensuring project success

The project management field has long emphasized the value of communications. According to the Project Management Institute (PMI) Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), 75-90% of a project manager's time should be spent communicating. According to their 2013 "Pulse of the Profession" report, 55% of project managers rated effective communication as their most critical success factor and half of all "unsuccessful" projects (i.e., projects that fail to meet their stated objectives) can be attributed to ineffective communications.

But, we're not professional project managers, right? We're researchers and evaluators, busy completing projects and unable to spend the majority of our time communicating. True...but it is also true that project management offers recommendations we can use to strengthen our communication practices. With consistent and effective communication, we increase our chances of producing high-quality research and evaluation projects, meeting timeline and budget requirements, and fostering positive team dynamics.

You may be an independent consultant completing projects on your own. However, many of us function in a team environment. When multiple people work together on a project, we have a research team. Team members may be employed by one agency or affiliated with one school or university. In other cases, the team may represent various contractors or collaborators working together.

Like other project teams, research teams can struggle with poor communication, threatening project quality, stakeholder satisfaction, team relationships, and agency reputations. On the other hand, open and productive communication can not only reduce these risks but also strengthen collaboration, allowing team members to more effectively use their strengths and resources to enhance the project.

This tip sheet offers recommendations that researchers can apply to strengthen their team communication practices.

### Develop a communications plan

Do not assume that effective communication within the team will just happen naturally. It is important to create a plan to lay out your communication needs and strategies. When developing a communications plan, consider the following components.

**What information does each team member need to have?** At the beginning of a project, team members should have a shared understanding of the project scope, timelines, and budget. They also need to be clear about the specific role that they will play in meeting these objectives.



Along the way, the team needs updated information. Are project tasks being completed as expected? Have changes been made that will impact the work of others? Are any challenges coming up that need to be addressed by the team?

Different team members may need different information. Perhaps your team includes a statistician who will complete the quantitative analysis or a copy editor who will review your final report. These individuals may not need to be updated about every aspect of project implementation, though they will need to know if there are changes that impact timelines or the scope of their role. Other people may be involved in multiple aspects of the project and should have more regular updates.

### How frequently should communication take place?

There is no general “rule” for how often communication should take place. Some project management methodologies, such as the Agile framework, recommend a brief daily standing meeting for the team to check in. You may not need to meet that often. The goal, however, is to plan updates and check-ins at the right frequency to meet team needs. A very complex project or one with a short timeline may require weekly updates, for example, while a less complex or longer-term project may meet less frequently.

**What is the best format for communication?** There are obviously many different communications platforms available these days – face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, email, etc. Knowing which methods to choose is critical – what are the typical channels used by your team or organization? What are the preferred methods of your team? Each method has advantages and disadvantages. Use a variety of strategies, to keep the team engaged and to share information as effectively as possible.



**Tip: Build in at least some face-to-face meetings**





Do not underestimate the value of face-to-face communication, as it can be a more effective way of addressing difficult situations and allows the important advantage of being able to see nonverbal communications.



**Tip: Use a variety of communications strategies**

Do not rely on just one communication strategy. Using a variety of communications approaches can keep your strategy from being too “routine”, while also aligning with different team member learning styles and preferences.

## Sample communications plan

Strategy	Audience	Frequency	Purpose	Responsibility
 Data collection team meeting	Staff involved in conducting data collection	Weekly, during active data collection phase	Review data collection status, update recruitment strategies, identify and resolve data collection challenges	Data collection lead
 Project status meeting	Full project team members	Monthly	Review project status, identify and resolve challenges, clarify upcoming work plan	Project lead
 Written project status report	Full project team, agency leadership, client	Quarterly	Provide updates, confirm upcoming tasks	Project lead
 Online project management system	Full project team	Weekly	Maintain updated documentation of task completion, expenses, and issues encountered	All team members

## Integrate communications into overall work plan and budget

Once you have developed your communications plan it should be integrated into your overall work plan, with the required tasks clearly documented and assigned to team members. Remember to budget the time and funding for these activities. If your project runs over budget or behind schedule, you may be tempted to scale back the time and money spent on communications. Resist this temptation. When projects face challenges, it is especially important that the team works together to identify the impact of these challenges and implement solutions.

## Hold a project kickoff meeting

A kickoff is a formal step taken at the beginning of a project, in which the full team comes together to review the goals, requirements, and plan. It can be useful to have the team review a draft work plan, but the intent is not to present an already developed and rigid plan. Instead, use this meeting to clarify roles, hear suggestions from the team, identify and plan for potential challenges, and reach consensus about how to move forward. Use the kick off meeting to review:

- The project goals
- Timeframe
- Budget
- Intended deliverables
- Team roles and contributions
- Potential challenges
- Communications needs and approaches

## Use effective meeting strategies

Project meetings are a valuable project management strategy, but it's important that these meetings are thoughtful and effective. Consider strategies such as:

- Distributing the agenda in advance, allowing team members the chance to add items for discussion
- Ensuring that attendees are in clear in advance what they will be asked to do or to share in the meeting
- Taking and distributing meeting notes
- Creating action plans based on the discussion, ensuring that important take-aways are not forgotten

During the meeting, control the agenda while also being flexible. When an issue comes up that is not on the agenda, determine whether the new topic is critical to address, even if it means delaying discussion on other agenda items, or whether it is something to be postponed for later discussion. If delayed, be explicit about how and when the issue will be revisited.

## Consider using online project management software

There are numerous online applications for project and portfolio management. These can be extremely useful for documenting project status and centralizing communication. However, these systems are only effective when they are used consistently. If using software that is new to the team, illustrate the value and purpose of the system, provide instructions about how to use it, and establish expectations regarding its use (such as how frequently updates should be made).

## Monitor and assess success

An important step in project management is to assess the success of the project when it concludes. As part of this process, explicitly review communication successes and challenges. Were communications tasks completed on time and on budget? If not, why not?

As part of a project debriefing, or on its own, request feedback from the project team regarding communication. Did everyone have the information that they needed to complete their part of the project? Was information clear, understandable, and timely? Did everyone feel comfortable sharing their ideas or raising concerns?

Use this feedback to reflect on your communication strengths, and develop strategies to improve. Enhancing communication with your project team may be the most important thing that you can do to improve the quality of your research projects.

**“In teamwork, silence isn't golden. It's deadly.”**

**- Mark Sanborn**

# Tips for effective project communication

There are numerous books, research studies, and websites devoted to sharing effective communication practices. These are just some of the most important recommendations for enhancing communication within research project teams.



## **Be honest and transparent**

Be sure that the full team has complete access to information related to project tasks, budget, timeline, and challenges. Transparency helps to build mutual trust, increasing the likelihood that team members will feel comfortable sharing issues and suggestions.



## **Be accessible**

Provide people with multiple ways to reach you, and demonstrate that you are fully involved and engaged. Make it clear that you want to hear people's ideas and concerns.



## **Be flexible and open to feedback**

Communication is a two-way street. You don't need to always be right, and it can benefit the team to show that you are also willing to hear feedback and to improve your approach.



## **Be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences**

Avoid using sarcasm, colloquialisms, jargon, or other terms that may not be universally understood within your team. Be aware that different team members – due to cultural background, their role in the organization, or other factors - may be less comfortable providing feedback in group settings. Provide multiple strategies for them to share insights and feedback.



## **Maintain a positive attitude**

If you are leading a team, you help to set the tone. It is okay to talk about challenges or issues, but focus on identifying solutions and solving problems rather than complaining.



## **Be inclusive**

Try to include everyone who should be included whenever you communicate – if you are not sure whether an update or meeting would be beneficial, err on the side of inclusion. Demonstrate the value that all team members can bring to the process.



## **Use active listening**

Develop active listening skills to ensure that you understand team members' opinions and perspectives. Be aware of non-verbal communication, such as body language.



## **Provide feedback**

Share direct and constructive feedback to team members regarding their role in the project, including highlighting the positive contributions of each person to the overall project success.

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