Chapter 6 - Client Engagement Process

"What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate"

Cool Hand Luke

In 2015, I developed a PMI certified eight-hour training course discussing client engagement. The following discussion has been excerpted from that course. The course summary can be found in appendix B.

Client engagement helps us to better understand the why of a system before we can implement using a purpose-driven approach to management. This presents a problem. We must work with the client and the various levels of stakeholders. Stakeholders often fill the role as sponsors.

In a 2021 Forbes Business Development Council article, Majeed Hosselney reminds us:

"For example, I'd underline the importance of sponsorship as the air a project breathes. To build the road ahead, a project leader generally depends on proper sponsorship by business leaders. To be successful, a project also needs to achieve a balance between focusing on not only technical solutions but also the people who are the target for the solution and the processes supporting the solution's growth."

If we are left-brain dominant, reaching out to "people" is not our favorite pastime. We would prefer to read a set of requirements and specs and build.

Jay Grusin in *"Intelligent Analysis"* points out another problem in pursuit of "why".

"We find developing key intelligence questions challenging because we assume that we know the client's requirements and we know what they want to hear."

In a recent article, James Clear discussed additional common management problems:

1) Your Client Gives You Vague, Ever-changing Requirements.
2) Your Client is Slow with Communication.
3) The Project Doesn't Start on Time.
4) You Try to Manage Every Project the Same Way.
5) The Client Doesn't Like What You Created.
6) Your Point of Contact Doesn't Seem to Care About Your Project.
7) Too Much Time is Spent Solving Problems After Projects Are "Live".
8) Your Company Wants to Grow the Business and Asks for Help in Finding New Opportunities.

There is a common theme that permeates these major (and common) challenges. We are not talking with the right people (stakeholder management), and we are not communicating effectively. Chapters 10, 13 and Appendix X3 of the Program Management body of knowledge address these issues.

Steve Yager, CEO Artemis International, further highlights these two underlying areas of concern:

Stakeholder Management.

Effective stakeholder management requires the identification of individuals who are affected by and/or can affect the successful outcome of a project, especially those who are of a less than positive disposition toward the project objectives. All stakeholders require attentive management to minimize obstacles of this type.

Solution: Create a truly collaborative work environment. Visibility into the work involved is likely to result in change. Collaboration allows the project to be analyzed and discussed by all interested and affected parties. This will ensure minimal uncertainty and provide the wherewithal to keep all interested parties "on board". Ownership of risk identification, planning, management, and tracking is paramount. This information must be published and provided to the appropriate stakeholders.

Communication breakdowns cause unclear project goals and objectives.

Management may rethink its goals for a project, not communicate them well and expect the team to adapt accordingly.

Solution: Working without an up-to-date, well-stated purpose can blur project focus and demotivate the group. Having a well-crafted purpose statement helps to highlight, record and track enterprise-level and project-level objectives and communicate them in an understandable manner. Always begin with documented criteria for measuring success. Require the project sponsor to define a measurable result. Not only will this increase the chances of project success, it also will aid in project scope management. To avoid communication breakdowns, project managers also should facilitate good communication — conflict resolution, coordination, and empowerment.

Whether you are pursuing a recompete or preparing to bid on a new opportunity, you must shape and track the relationships with the client.

Patrick Lencioni outlines “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” in his book by the same name. His pillars of dysfunction include:

Dysfunction	Results

Absence of Trust	Invulnerability
Fear of Conflict	Artificial Harmony
Lack of Commitment	Ambiguity
Avoidance of Accountability	Low Standards
Inattention to Results	Status and Ego

These dysfunctions will impact on your ability of the team to engage with the client. As you work with your client, you must be aware of each. Start by building trust with the client, putting your fear of conflict aside, making firm commitments, setting high performance standards, and ensuring that you follow through with valued results.

Establish trust in client relationships early in project development. Shape and track those relationships over the life of the project and beyond.

Projects may come and go, but clients will likely be around longer. If you manage the project with purpose, trust is a residual benefit.

You need to shape and maintain client relationships.

Shaping and Tracking Relationships

You must identify stakeholders and reach out to them. They are unlikely to reach out to you.

- You must ethically shape relationships to the benefit of the client.
- You must include the shaping process in your collection plans.
- You must identify stakeholders with the authority to request requirements.

Client engagement can be broken down into four phases:

1. Doing your homework,
2. Preparing for and engagement,
3. Conducting the engagement, and
4. Documenting the engagement

We often find ourselves skipping steps 1,3 and 4, jumping right into a meeting.

Do your homework.

In addition to identifying stakeholders, you must understand their role. Learn before you go. You need to anticipate their needs but be careful not to project. Your preconceived ideas may not be shared. Moreover, they may be wrong.

"There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action."

Johann Wolfgang von Goeth

Prepare for the engagement.

Take control and actively set appointments, emphasizing the importance of collecting the stakeholder's position.

Before the engagement, clearly understand what you know and don't know. Build a list of questions that you want to discuss. I have even sent the questions ahead to give the stakeholder time to consider them.

Engage

Start by establishing a trusted relationship. Negotiate rules, rights, and responsibilities of the relationship. Talk about on and off record findings. Build a sense of mutual respect.

Ask for permission to ask questions. Ask permission to ask about issues and pain. Establish a working relationship. Ensure a sense of mutual respect and openness.

Work to qualify of disqualify the requirement. If the requirement appears to fall withing the scope of the contract that is great, if not, work with the client to formulate potential alternative solutions.

As discussed earlier, contracts will likely get into the act if the new requirement appears to be out of scope.

Share your purpose and goals. Ensure that you communicate that your purpose is to see their world from their perspective to determine whether or not the project will address their needs and create value. Your goal is to determine whether or not you can incorporate a solution to their needs withing the scope of the project.

Remember that active listening is difficult. Learn and practice your interpersonal dialogue skills. Those skills include Socratic questioning, reversing, and nurturing.

Socratic Questioning

> *Asking a series of questions, whereby the prospect discovers the desired knowledge by answering the questions.*

Reversing

> *Answering a question of statement with a question.*

Nurturing

> *Questioning and reversing without nurturing is interrogating. Help the interviewee to stay or feel ok.*

Thomas A Harris, M.C. published a book, "I'm OK – You're OK", that discusses how to make someone feel ok.

I like to use what is called intelligently asking dumb questions. It makes the interviewee feel ok.

There is a difference between acting dumb and being dumb. There is a limit to how smart you can be. There isn't a limit to how dumb you can be. Don't look too good or talk to wise.

You will be perceived, positioned, and treated at the level of your thinking. Credibility and trust are established by the questions you ask, not the statements you make.

If you start the process well, the process gets easier. If you start poorly, the process gets harder. Practice makes perfect.

Keys to Success:

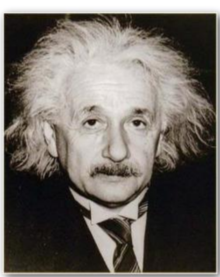
- *Ask questions – don't assume anything.*
- *Listen more than you speak.*
- *Thank the interviewee for their time.*
- *Confirm the next steps.*

Failure to follow-up is an opportunity missed to understand needs from a stakeholder's perspective. Remember, people love to be interviewed.

Where do we fail in the elicitation process? **We don't listen well.**

- Under pressure we default to speaking.
- We think faster than the prospect speaks.
- We tend to think about our response.
- It's challenging to listen, take notes and formulate the next question.

No thinking, thinking comes right before trouble, listen. You can improve your skills by practicing in low-risk situations, taking notes and focusing on the client, staying focused, following up on the present question, paraphrasing to review what you are hearing.



Thinking

"The thinking that got us here, is not the thinking that is going to get us where we need to be."

Albert Einstein

Don't listen with your motor running!

Document the engagement.

Documenting the results of an engagement is essential. Make sure to capture key details, the client's perceptions, and their needs. Remember your purpose, providing value to the client.

Evaluate Results

The hardest task is to collect all that you have learned and determine its impact on client value. You must evaluate the results of the engagement without bias, without preconceived notions. Ask you self, “what have I learned?”

Have you identified both hard and soft requirements? Have I identified requirements that will cause implementation problems?

As you look at the results of your effort, you must also evaluate your own performance. What could you have done better? What will you do differently next time?

Document your lessons learned and share them with others so that the next capture will be better.

Remember, you will be perceived, positioned, and treated at the level of your thinking. Credibility and trust are established by the questions you ask, not the statements that you make.