

Encoding and decoding communication competencies in project management – an exploratory study

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of an exploratory study of project managers' competency in two core communication processes – encoding and decoding. Using data collected from 186 cross-functional project team members from a variety of industries during nationwide project management workshops, stepwise regression analyses explored the association of project managers' decoding and encoding, with team members' satisfaction and productivity. Results show a significant communication–performance relationship. Specifically, project managers' competency in decoding and encoding are significantly associated with team member satisfaction, while project managers' encoding is significantly associated with project team productivity. Implications and future directions for both researchers and practicing project managers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over 60 years ago, Chester Barnard published his short, yet influential classic, *The Functions of the Executive*. In his book, he strongly asserted that communication is the primary task of any executive, and communication with employees regarding their concerns, problems, ideas, and suggestions about the organization is the critical skill of managing. As he originally stated, “In the exhaustive theory of organization, communication would occupy a central place, because the structure, extensiveness, and scope of organizations are almost entirely determined by communication techniques.” [1].

Barnard's insights aptly apply to today's project managers who occupy a central role in the structure, extensiveness, and scope of organizational work. As more and more organizations of the 21st century

transform their structures and processes to accelerate and enhance project work [2], project managers often become quasi-executives with high responsibility and accountability, but minimum authority. They must influence a myriad of challenges that coordinate interdependent, concurrent, and cross-functional work efforts as well as effectively negotiate with a variety of project stakeholders [3,4]. Nowhere are these challenges felt so acutely than in communicating effectively with project team members who may be quite diverse in order to realize successful project outcomes [5]. Effective responses to these growing challenges require project managers who are, first and foremost, competent communicators.

The purpose of my paper is to advance our understanding of what competent communication entails for project managers who are challenged to produce successful project outcomes. To this point, I have designed an exploratory study to answer the following research question: What are the associations between project managers' competence in two core processes of communication – encoding and decoding – and their team members' satisfaction and productivity?

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To answer this question, I administered a survey to 186 members of cross-functional project teams from a variety of industries during a series of nationwide project management seminars in the USA. Items in this questionnaire asked team members to assess the encoding and decoding communication competencies of their respective project managers, their (the team members') satisfaction with their project manager and team, and their judgments of their teams' productivity.

Results produced significant findings that project managers' encoding and decoding are associated with team satisfaction and productivity. No research to date has explored this association in terms of the core components of the communication process: encoding and decoding. The findings make an important contribution to the literature for both practicing project managers and researchers in the field. Last, the findings suggest several areas for future research in this area.

2. Literature review

Defining competent communication behaviors has been an active area of research and application in the field of communication for over 30 years. Researchers have broadly defined communication competence from a variety of perspectives including goals, change, and skills. For example, Wiemann [6] and O'Hair et al. [7] define communication competence as the ability of an interactant to choose among available communication behaviors in order to successfully accomplish their own interpersonal goals during an encounter. Spitzberg and Cupach [8] and Morreale et al. [9] indicate that competent communication occurs when individuals are motivated to communicate and capable of expressing knowledge, skills, and sensitivity about the particular and changeable context within which interpersonal communication occurs. From a skills perspective, the early work of social psychologist Argyris [10] influenced communication researchers who view competence primarily as a composite of interpersonal skills such as self-disclosure [11], openness and trust [10], and empathy [6].

In the field of project management, competency is implicit in studies that have identified the importance of various organizational aspects of communication. For example, researchers have identified and/or described the criticality of communication in project feedback mechanisms and channels [12], the listening and persuading behaviors of project leaders [13], the communication of project goals by project leaders [14], and the monitoring and feedback of project data [3]. The results of these and similar studies confirm the overall value of communication in managing projects, but contain little explicit information about how this value might operate through project managers. A key

way to better understand this worth is to focus more narrowly on the core characteristics of communication and their application within the context of project management.

At the core of the communication process are two major elements: encoding and decoding [15]. Encoding is a type of active sending of messages [16] and technically refers to the process of constructing stimuli that may represent meaning. A signal, or message, is produced and may or may not be emitted [17]. Encoding encompasses the activities within a person that are involved in transforming inner thoughts, ideas, feelings, and information into messages. The encoding activities of communication are speech, nonverbal signs, and writing. Decoding, on the other hand, is a type of active listening to messages [16], which technically refers to the process of turning sensations into meaning or patterned codes [17]. Decoding involves the transformation of sensory input into significant interpretation(s). The decoding activities of communication include listening, reading, and perception of nonverbal signs.

Within the context of work organizations, Monge et al. [18] designed and tested a model of communicator competence for the workplace that operationalized these definitions of encoding and decoding. Their findings support the use of encoding and decoding in defining communication competency for the workplace and also show that communicator competence is best understood within particular contexts.

When applied to the context of project management, competency in encoding and decoding behaviors may play an important part in achieving project outcomes. For example, the results of research by Pinto and Pinto [5] show that managers' efforts to clarify and establish shared agreement for deliverables positively influence team member satisfaction. This finding is consistent with research that demonstrates the significant role communication plays in job satisfaction [19,20] and satisfaction with one's co-workers and managers [21].

Pinto and Pinto [5] also found that project performance on task outcomes – budget, schedule, level of performance, and likelihood of usage by clients – improves with managers who actively communicate with team members. A recent study by Ammeter and Dukerich [14] supports this link between project manager/leader communication behavior and task performance. Their results show that the overall factor of project leader behavior, which included communication of project goals, was a significant predictor of budget performance as well as a significant predictor of the perceptions of project and team performance.

The results of the aforementioned studies identify the importance of project managers' communication behaviors, but do not further our knowledge about their

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