

Attacking Unproductive Communication: The Case for Clear and Stable Priorities



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Abstract

Unclear and unstable priorities force everyone in the organization into unproductive communications. While the cost of unclear and unstable priorities is tough to quantify, it is far higher than most would guess. In addition to lost time communicating, productivity is lost and tasks are stretched out. This paper helps managers to recognize the signs of multitasking and provides strategies for addressing the problem.

Introduction

People in multiple project organizations often spend a fair amount of their time communicating. Some would argue this is good—the more we communicate the better. To a certain extent this is true—productive communication is focused on learning what is needed to better complete tasks and on coordinating our actions with others to better accomplish project objectives. Unfortunately, not all of the communication in project organizations is productive. Often, we spend a fair amount of time communicating to compensate for inadequate or ineffective systems. One such communication time sink occurs whenever organizations lack an effective system for setting clear and stable priorities.

The absence of clear and stable priorities forces everyone in the organization to spend extra time communicating. Project managers spend time convincing resource managers and team leaders why it is so important to bump up the priority on their project. Resource managers spend extra time explaining to project managers their situations and why they must make certain decisions. Both groups find themselves in meeting after meeting with top management negotiating and lobbying for today's top priority status and deciding whose work must now be postponed to make room. Those doing the project work are caught in the middle; they find themselves moving from one job to another just in time to be told to change over to a third.

The Signs of Unclear and Unstable Priorities

Many project organizations suffer from unclear and/or unstable priorities. Note that these are related but sometimes separate problems. We use the term unclear priorities to refer to a situation in which workers, managers and leadership either have no idea or differ in opinion as to the relative importance of completing the many open tasks from the many ongoing projects. Unclear priorities usually result from a lack of information about the current status of the project and the amount of work that remains to complete the project. Unstable priorities exist when organizations frequently shift the relative importance of competing tasks. Shifting priorities is most often management's response to new information about ongoing projects.

Some of the symptoms of an organization suffering from unclear and unstable priorities include:

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- Workers frequently shifting from one task to another before completing the task they are working on. We call this multitasking and will discuss this symptom more below.
- Workers and managers meeting on a frequent or regular basis in order to clarify project status and negotiate new priorities.
- Frustration and a shared feeling of not being able to accomplish anything. When priorities are unclear or always shifting, we keep busy but rarely feel like we are able to accomplish anything.
- Frequent conflicts between managers in different organizational areas or dimensions of the organizational matrix over resource allocation decisions. Low levels of trust resulting from continuous and unresolved conflicts.

Working in an organization where priorities are unclear and unstable is never a rewarding experience. Turnover often results as resources seek a more fulfilling environment to work and interact with others.

The Costs of Shifting Priorities

What are the costs of unclear and unstable priorities? While tough to quantify, we believe they are far higher than most would guess. There are both tangible and intangible costs—the tangible being those that directly affect the bottom line of the company, and the intangible being those that affect the quality of life of those working in the project organization.

The Tangibles: The tangible costs all come as a result of the impact of unclear and unstable priorities on the folks in the trenches—the people doing project work. Project workers in today's organizations all have a long list of tasks they need to complete for various projects. Multitasking happens when workers frequently switch from one task to another without first completing the task at hand. Multitasking hurts the organization in two ways:

- Tasks stretch out. A five-day task that is worked on one day per week suddenly becomes a five-week task. All downstream tasks are forced to wait longer before they can be accomplished, causing projects to stretch out.
- Productivity declines. Every time a worker switches tasks, there is time lost in doing what it takes to package up the task being set aside and get back up to speed on the task that is now the top priority.

These effects are illustrated in Exhibit 1. We start with three tasks assigned to a resource. Each task is part of a larger project and each takes three days to complete. Suppose the true priority of the tasks—the priority that best satisfies the needs of the customers—is A followed by B followed by C. If these priorities are communicated to the worker and the priorities are left unchanged for 9 days, the three tasks will complete in days 3, 6 and 9 respectively. The “could happen” scenario reflects what happens if, as the result of unclear or unstable priorities, the resource switches to the next task when the current task is only 50% complete. All three tasks are still completed in 9 days, but look at when they finish. Task A now completes at day 7, Task B at day 8, while Task C still completes at

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Day 9. The impact on the system is that other project tasks that are waiting for Tasks A and B to complete will be delayed. What has been gained? Perhaps we have gained a little peace of mind for the project managers watching tasks B and C because those tasks started a little earlier than they would have otherwise. For the organization as a whole, though, the truth is that nothing is gained by multitasking; instead, time has been lost.

Multitasking

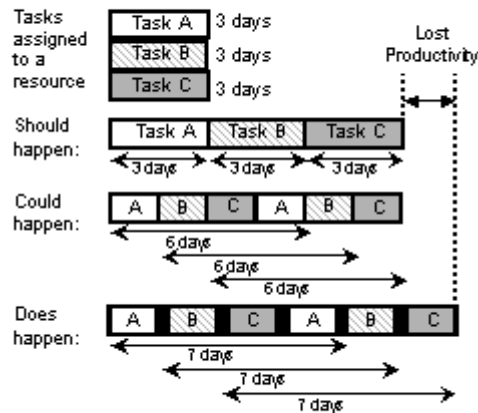


Exhibit 1

Another very important effect is illustrated on the “does happen” line of Exhibit 1. Switching from one task to another can rarely be done instantaneously. Almost always there is some time required to set aside the task we are working on. We must make notes of where we left off, gather and organize the materials we are using, write an email or phone the persons that will be impacted by the delay we are introducing, or even schedule a meeting to ensure other balls aren’t dropped as a result. In addition, extra time is now required to start up the task we are switching to. We must gather and review where we were when we last set the task aside. On creative tasks especially, we can spend a substantial amount of time trying to recreate the train of thought we had established prior to the interruption.

What is the impact? Now all tasks are delayed and delivered later than they would have been in the absence of the multitasking. While the lost time in switching between one task and the next often doesn’t seem like much, it can quickly add up. Our experience with organizations is that as much as 25%-40% of productive time is lost switching between uncompleted tasks. That means the organization’s capacity for producing projects is 25-40% or what it could be without multitasking.

Perhaps the worst effects are found in the dynamics that occur over time as a result of unclear and unstable priorities. Exhibit 2 diagrams how multitasking can and often does play itself out in the dynamics of the organization over time. We have seen how multitasking causes project tasks to be extended. If we are not very careful in how we manage the multitasking, it is not unusual for the result to be tasks that are delayed past their scheduled completion time. As project tasks are delayed, more and more projects become delayed and project deadlines become threatened. As more project deadlines

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become threatened, managers react with more frequent changes in priorities. As priorities shift with more frequency, multitasking increases which only makes the problems worse. We end up working harder and harder, getting less and less done, and living in a chaos that sometimes becomes the death spiral of project organizations. The way to break out of this death spiral is to eliminate the bad multitasking. Most organizations are blind to this solution because they don't see multitasking as the core problem. The only other way to break out of this spiral is to remove projects from the system—that is, to reduce the amount of work in the system. Given the organization's inability to effectively complete work, the removal of work often comes in the form of canceled projects or projects put on hold. This resolution is hardly a satisfying one. The organization has failed. Both customer and management expectations are not met, and those in the workforce who had invested so much of their time and energy in the canceled project feel cheated and empty.



Exhibit 2

The Intangibles: The intangibles are the byproducts of working in an environment where almost nobody seems to know what is really important, and those that do are sure to change their minds by tomorrow. Workers are constantly frustrated in their attempts to get things done. Offices are littered with partially completed project work and often more time is spent organizing the chaos than working to complete tasks. Workers are fed a steady stream of mixed signals leaving them confused and discouraged as they try to sort through and determine what really needs to be done. Managers unable to see what is best for the organization become parochial in their views and revert to protecting the interests of their project or their department. Conflicts are frequent and almost predictable as the organization repeatedly deals with determining what is the top priority for today. Over the long term, levels of trust can degrade to the point that cynicism sets in.

Perhaps the most significant intangible costs come from the impaired communications that result in this type of an environment. In the uncertain world of projects, effective communications are a must—they serve as the fabric from which successful projects are cut. An organization's ability to communicate new information—updated requirements, task status, new discoveries, test results, quality problems, specification changes—often makes the difference between success and failure in the eyes of the customer. Effective communications are difficult enough to establish in high quality work environments.

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They require proactive efforts to identify the type of information that needs to flow and to create the channels by which everyone will keep informed. When conflict, frustration, discouragement and low levels of trust mark the work environment, the already difficult task of establishing effective communications is made next to impossible. If we are to make progress in improving communications in our project organizations, creating a system by which work priorities are clear to everyone and stable over time is a must.

Improving Communication by Stabilizing the Project Workplace

If the above descriptions come close to capturing the problems you are experiencing in your project organization, there are some actions you can take that will have an immediate impact on the productivity of your resources and the quality of life in the workplace. We recommend that you:

1. Begin an Internal Campaign to Reduce Multitasking.
2. Implement a System for Priority Setting.

The first initiative—the campaign against multitasking—can begin immediately and is only limited in scope only by the imagination, ingenuity, and drive of the leadership of the organization. The second initiative—improving how priorities are established—takes a little more time to institute, but will bring a long term stability to the organization that will greatly improve your competitive position.

Multitasking—Corporate Enemy Number 1: It has been our experience that multitasking is the standard mode of operations in most project organizations. Very few tasks are ever completed without interruption. It is commonly expected that a resource will work a task for a while, set it aside to pick up a new hot task, then come back to it later to make more progress. We feel there are several reasons why bad multitasking is so prevalent:

- Unawareness: Many of us—both as project resources and managers—have simply been unaware of the costs associated with the practice of multitasking. As a result, it often occurs simply because we allow it to occur. We multitask because we have always multitasked just as everyone has always multitasked.
- Progress over completion: Making progress on tasks is often perceived as being more valuable or more important than completing tasks. Sometimes this is simply part of the culture that exists in an organization. Other times, emphasizing visible progress is a survival response on the part of project resources. When you have three different project managers poking their heads into your cubicle wanting to know how their task is coming along, you are more inclined to switch between tasks in order to show progress to each of them. Still other times, the emphasis on progress rather than completion comes from the measurement system in place. For instance, if resources are reporting percent complete, then resources are often motivated to show progress. This can encourage resources to “cherry-pick”—that is, to switch to another task when the going gets tough on the current task. In this way, the resource can report more progress by switching than by sticking to the current task and completing it.

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- **Over-reactive Management:** A primary responsibility of management is to see that the right people are working on the right things at the right time. In the highly dynamic environment of most project organizations, this can represent quite a challenge. When things change, for whatever reason, managers are presented with an opportunity to change priorities. The decision boils down to a simple tradeoff—the cost of changing priorities versus the cost of staying with the current set of priorities. How a manager perceives these costs will determine their response. Too often, managers underestimate the cost of changing priorities and overestimate the costs of staying with the current set of priorities. That is, managers tend to over-react—shifting priorities frequently in response to every change they see in the environment around them. For many, this frequent shifting is seen as simply doing their jobs well.

The first step to eliminating multitasking is simply to decide to eliminate it. This is such an obvious step that it is easily overlooked. Leadership—having been made aware that multitasking is causing significant performance and morale problems in their organization—often looks past this first step to solving the problem. Organizations rush headlong into new scheduling systems, new measurement systems, new office layouts, or new training programs to address the problem. Before implementing any of these, the first step is to declare that multitasking is corporate enemy #1. Leadership must establish the expectation that the standard mode of operating is going to change. Frequent switching between tasks will be replaced by infrequent switching between tasks. As with all new expectations, this will take some time to establish and will place new demands on everyone. Workers will be challenged to stay on task. This is not something they are used to doing and will sometimes require them to establish new work patterns. Perhaps the most challenged will be management. First, management must shift the emphasis from making progress to completing tasks. This is a fairly simple and straightforward change to make. Second, management must shift to more of a hands-off approach to managing their resources and their projects. This will be a more difficult change for many to make and will take some time and practice. Management must perceive their jobs as being the ones who create a stable work environment where tasks can be completed in as short a time as possible. To do this, workers must have clear priorities that change much less frequently than they currently do.

Many managers will balk at this shift. Minimizing the frequency with which they change priorities places a premium on getting priorities right the first time. They will argue—and probably rightly so—that they don't have the information they need to establish the right priorities. While the information they have is certainly far from perfect, it is our contention that most managers have enough information to begin stabilizing their workplace. Moreover, we contend that the improved productivity that will directly result will compensate for any wrong decisions they make. Managers usually have a fairly well developed intuition regarding the organization and the relative priorities of tasks under their control. We recommend that in the absence of information, managers apply their intuition in the initial setting of priorities understanding that some of them may be wrong. Once set, we recommend that managers clearly communicate the priorities to the workers, then commit themselves and their people to working tasks without interruption

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as often as possible for a fixed period of time, say one month. During the month, managers should work to minimize the number of times the priorities are changed. What will happen is that productivity of that department will increase dramatically. Many more tasks will be completed in a much shorter period of time.

Better Information for Setting Priorities: Once the organization has taken steps to begin eliminating multitasking, energy can and should be spent improving the information system for priority setting. While we never want to replace our managers' intuition regarding what is important and what isn't, we do want to supplement their intuition with accurate information. For now, let's focus on the needs of the resource managers—those responsible for setting priorities across the projects that pass through a functional department. In setting priorities, resource managers need answers to the following questions:

- What is the current status of all projects? Which are projected to be on time, which are projected to be late?
- Which tasks are directly impacting project completions? Some tasks have slack associated with them and some don't. Knowing the ones that don't is important, because any delay in these tasks will translate into a delay in the completion of the project.
- How much slack is remaining for the rest of the tasks? All else equal, the more slack remaining, the lower a priority the task is.
- What is the impact of delaying a task? If the task is set so low in priority that nobody can work on it for a period of time, what impact will this have on completing the project? This requires knowing the tradeoffs that exist between tasks in the department.

Implementing a *Critical Chain Project Management* (CCPM) system provides accurate answers to all of these questions. CCPM systems are specifically designed to allow managers to establish clear and stable priorities in their organization, and ensure that these priorities are based on an accurate and up-to-date snapshot of the projects in the organization (Newbold 1998). The mechanisms used in CCPM to establish clear and stable priorities include:

- **Resolved Resource Contention:** When creating project plans, the capacity of the resources in the organization is taken into account. Resource limitations for key resources are reflected in the plan in that these resources are not overloaded.
- **Controlled Flow of Work:** All early start schedules are replaced with a pacing mechanism that ensures gating tasks (those without predecessors) are started at the right time—not too early and not too late. This enables managers to use a first come, first served sequencing rule without fear of misplacing priorities.
- **Buffer Management:** Buffers are used to insulate the project against disruptions. Task updating replaces rescheduling and reports indicate the amount of buffer remaining in the project. Buffer management allows resource managers to know which tasks are impacting project completion and

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the impact of tradeoffs in delaying different tasks. Managers can set priorities with full knowledge of the current status of the projects and the most likely ramifications of their decisions.

CCPM has been implemented with success in a wide variety of industries. Often incorrectly viewed as a scheduling solution, CCPM at its core is focused on changing how work is accomplished in project organizations. By supporting the managers in their quest to establish clear and stable priorities, CCPM provides a means by which organizations can improve both project performance and the quality of life in the organization. Both of these will contribute significantly to improved communications thereby improving the fabric of your project organization.

Unfortunately, space limitations prevent a more complete discussion of CCPM concepts. If you are interested in learning more, see Newbold (1998).

Conclusions

Unclear and unstable priorities undermine productive communications in a project organization. Workers spend their time frequently switching between tasks while managers try to sort through the impacts of uncompleted tasks and further rearrange priorities in response. Communications are wasted focusing on trying to clarify who needs to do what when, rather than on transferring the information needed to more successfully complete project tasks. Managers can greatly reduce the amount of bad multitasking by simply focusing their efforts in that direction. In addition, new systems like Critical Chain Project Management should be introduced that support managers efforts to establish clear and stable priorities.

References

Newbold, Robert C. 1998. *Project Management in the Fast Lane: Applying the Theory of Constraints*, St Lucie Press/APICS Series on Constraints Management.

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