

MEGA-PROJECT COMMUNICATIONS

Introduction

It is my intention to share with my fellow professionals, engaged in the execution of EPC projects, my experience in the management of mega projects across the globe. I plan to post several articles based on my experience, primarily focusing on the softer side of project management, where not much attention is paid. I have 40+ years of experience in the EPC industry and have successfully managed multiple international mega projects, each of them with its own sets of challenges.

Successful Communication Practices

In my experience, the impact of good communication on project success is often underestimated. The Project Director is generally too busy communicating with the client and his/her own corporate management and often ignores communicating with the project team on a regular basis.

Early in my career I got assigned, as a process engineer, to work on a large petrochemical project located in North Africa, which was my first experience working on a mega project. Although I worked on the project for almost a year, outside of my immediate work group I had no exposure to the project's big picture – overall scope, budget, completion schedule, management team structure, other execution locations etc. I believe management did not consider such communication with the working team was important.

I, however, felt very strongly that our performance would have improved had management regularly shared, the big project picture and drilled down to the levels where each person could see how his/her contribution impacted the project outcome.

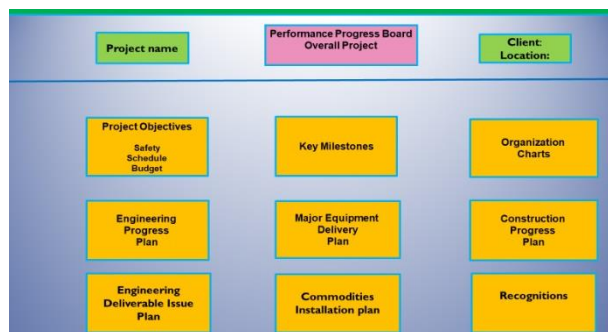
Fast forwarding twenty years, I was assigned as the Project Director on a mega project in the Far East with multiple execution centers and finally got my first opportunity to put in place what I always believed in.

During the project initiation stage, we at the leadership level recognized that effective communication had to be an essential part of our execution strategy, however, it was going to be a challenge given the true global nature of the project. We determined that we had to reach out to every member of the team and needed to clearly communicate project objectives, management expectations, budget, schedule and progress plans. Further, each of these elements had to be drilled down to the deliverable level by discipline in the engineering offices and the site.

Step 1: Communication Tool

We designed our communication method centered around the display of project information within the project task force areas in an informative and visually attractive format creating a consistency and transparency of information in all locations of the task force.

Typically, information boards displayed discipline organization charts, key schedule milestones, progress “S” curves, deliverable production chart (plan vs actual) and recognitions etc. We ensured that the



ownership of the information remained with respective discipline leads. The progress information in was updated at each reporting period.

Step 2: Project Town Hall Meetings

Another aspect of our communication strategy was to hold monthly team **town hall meetings** at each location. The primary objective was to connect with all team members in an open and honest manner.

The Project Director, along with the leadership team, presented project status and feedback (good and bad) to team members.



Each meeting ended with Q&A session where any team member had opportunity to ask questions of the leadership team and offer suggestions for improved performance.

Step 3: Reward & Recognition

Motivating the team was a critical element of our communication strategy... we had designed and implemented a **reward and recognition program** right from the beginning of the project. At each of the town hall meetings, several individuals/teams were recognized for their outstanding contributions.

When we achieved certain key milestones, we held project celebrations... an excellent way to build team spirit. We presented certificates of appreciation and dinner vouchers/company gifts as a token of management appreciation.

We extended reward and recognition program to our contractors as well. Recognition of good performance from client turned out to be huge motivator for the contractor's team. We experienced higher level of productivity and much more professional and harmonious relationship between the client and contractors.

Benefits

I practiced this approach very successfully on all subsequent mega projects in Canada, Middle East, Far East and in South East Asia. With each successive project our tools were more advanced, but focus remained on the above elements.

Implementation of a well-organized project communication strategy will result into following benefits:

- All members will be well aligned to project goals
- Communication on the big picture drilled down to the deliverable level will help every member to relate his/her contribution to project goals
- Reward & Recognition will motivate teams leading to exceptional performance
- Production charts displayed in project task force areas provide transparency and focus for teams to achieve progress at the deliverable level – as one of the leads said – “If you can see it you can achieve it”

Conclusion

In conclusion, project performance is greatly enhanced through honest, open, and structured communication. Exceptional performance must be recognized and rewarded in town hall settings. This will only work if the leadership team believes in it.

It is easy to start communication sessions, but the challenge lies in continuing it. Therefore, the project leader must commit to hold such sessions on a regular basis until the project is complete.

Project success depends on the combined energies of the team and it is the responsibility of the leader to inspire teams to aspire for excellence. A well informed and motivated team will always exceed your expectation.

For questions or additional information on this topic email Jan K Varma, Director, Lumen PMC at jvarma@lumenpmc.com