The Importance of Follow-Up

This month, guest author Lisa L. Cronican writes about *The Importance of Follow-Up*. If you would like to volunteer to guest author a future CDC Unified Process Project Management Newsletter please contact the CDC UP at cdcup@cdc.gov.

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Throughout the life of a project, a project manager will follow-up on many types of communications; and yet it is so easy to forget that one call that wakes you up in the middle of the night in disbelief of a forgotten critical action. Follow-up provides more value than its message content however, as every communication, regardless of messaging, provides the communicator an opportunity to build visibility, trust, and enthusiasm within recipients. Successful managers recognize that follow-up communication reminds customers of their presence and is critical in maintaining their attention. Project Managers often work in environments where organizational demands, new ideas, and increased workloads can overwhelm the focus of project teams, sponsors and stakeholders. Follow-up can play a critical role in combating distractions within these key groups.

Project Managers often interact with overwhelmed sponsors and multitasking stakeholders. Project Managers that can effectively communicate with these groups can often turn risks into opportunity.

It is good practice to provide communication and status updates as requested by sponsors and stakeholders. Doing so provides these groups with needed information. Every time a follow-up is missed, a bit of trust and efficiency is lost. The Project Manager that takes follow-up communication a step further, providing information in advance of sponsor and stakeholder requests, nourishes greater trust and credibility.

The full value of follow-up is realized regardless of the messaging, each contact increases the visibility of the project to sponsors and stakeholders. An engaged sponsor is a powerful project resource, as their role can be leveraged to help mitigate risk and promote successful project outcomes. The more frequently stakeholders are engaged, the greater their support and involvement in the project is likely to be.

There are a number of ways follow-up can occur proactively to maintain contact and interaction, even when there is not an apparent information requirement. A few examples are:

- *Follow-up on previous follow-up*: Inquire if previous follow-up communication effectively addressed needs; are there any further requests the project needs to consider at this time?
- *Follow-up on meetings or status reporting*: Inquire if the information from project meetings or status reporting has proved beneficial? Are there any questions for the project at this time?

Follow-up leads to follow through and is necessary to effectively delegate tasks within project teams. Additional follow-up regarding delegated tasks status provides Project Managers with advanced awareness of impediments that could create delays or enhance schedule control. There is a further value beyond providing and receiving important information. Each communication serves as a queue to refocus the team's attention to their short term objectives. Project Managers who utilize follow-up as a focusing strategy understand the factors that can impede a team's attention and focus. In spite of sophisticated time management tools, facilitated training and self-help books, resources often inadvertently focus their attention on the most recently received or visible task versus that with the greatest priority. For Project Managers, ensuring the team is applying their attention as needed once they leave team meetings can be extremely challenging.

This is especially true for project teams utilizing shared resources. Such resources often spread their

attention across many projects. In such cases resources often take liberty in identifying how tasks are prioritized. As the Project Manager, you may have been diligent in your communication with a resources' manager to ensure their availability, but that agreement may have little to do with how the resource actually ends up applying their time on any given day. This can lead to tasks delays that cumulate, significantly impacting the project schedule. Frequent follow-up concentrated around current tasks should therefore occur with project teams throughout the project.

A good example of how to implement frequent and highly focused follow-up is the daily Scrum Meeting format utilized by Agile Project Managers. These meetings focus project teams "on their objectives and to help them avoid being thrown off track by less important concerns." Ken Schwaber, co-created with Jeff Sutherland the daily scrum meeting method.
http://www.effectivemeetings.com/teams/teamwork/scrum.asp

While Scrum was developed for software development projects, its follow-up principles can serve to manage team activity in any setting. Whether follow-up is daily, weekly, or of a longer iteration, the following key questions can provide a simple structured script for effective team follow-up:
• What did you do in the last iteration?
• What will you do in this next iteration?
• Are there any impediments in your way?

http://www.mountaingoatsoftware.com/scrum/daily-scrum

Some additional tips that may work for you
• Use MS Outlook tasks to create lists
• When you start a new notebook, leave the first 10 pages blank and put all of your follow-up on those pages, crossing out when complete
• At night if you remember something you should have completed, call and leave a VM or send yourself a quick email
• Spend 5 minutes at the start and end of each day thinking about what needs to be followed-up on

Project Managers should consider when developing their communication strategy the full benefits that can be achieved from frequent and thorough follow-up communication. Well executed follow-up can be highly effective in creating focus, engagement and enthusiasm within project teams, sponsors and stakeholders.

For more information and tools related to the Importance of Following-Up, the CDC Unified Process, or the Project Management Community of Practice please visit the CDC UP website at http://www.cdc.gov/cdcup/. ▮

Project Management Community of Practice

• *December 09, 2011*
  Enterprise Architecture

2012 PMCoP Calendar Dates
• *January 27, 2012*
• *March 01, 2012*
• *March 23, 2012*
• *April 27, 2012*
• *May 18, 2012*
• *June 22, 2012*
• *July 27, 2012*
• *August 24, 2012*
• *September 28, 2012*
• *October 26, 2012*
• *December 07, 2012*

For more information on the Project Management Community of Practice visit the PMCoP website at http://www2.cdc.gov/cdcup/library/pmcop/ ▮

CDC Unified Process Presentations

The CDC UP offers a short overview presentation to any CDC FTE or Non-FTE group. Presentations are often performed at your facility, on a day of the week convenient for your group, and typically take place over lunch structured as one hour lunch-and-learn style meeting.

Contact the CDC Unified Process at cdcup@cdc.gov or visit http://www.cdc.gov/cdcup to arrange a short overview presentation for your group. ▮

Contact the CDC Unified Process

The CDC Unified Process Project Management Newsletter is authored by Daniel Vitek, MBA, PMP and published by the Office of Surveillance, Epidemiology, and Laboratory Services.

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