Techniques for Communicating Risks and Sharing Bad News

Introduction

How you approach risk management from a communication perspective will show your comfort level with this topic and will directly affect how others approach it. Therefore, it is critical that you communicate with confidence, clarity, and comprehensiveness.

Project Manager – Project Sponsor Communications

Communicating risks can be much easier if your relationship with the project sponsor is strong. You must make sure that you choose the proper mechanism (face to face, e-mail, phone, etc.) for your relationship and the type of news. Unless there is an urgent risk event occurring, risk management should be part of your normal project status communications. How you communicate with your sponsor depends on the following:

- your current relationship with the sponsor
- the number of formal meetings you have with the sponsor
- the length and complexity of the project
- your sponsor’s involvement with the project

Communication methods include the sponsor status meeting, which allows you to talk with the project sponsor about the progress of the project. Also, invite the sponsor to attend project status meetings with the entire team. If you have a project bulletin board or newsletter, make sure the sponsor has access.

Sharing Bad News

Bad news can be anything from the occurrence of risk events to issue resolution against your preference to project conflicts. When you have bad news to deliver, try to do it in person. No sponsor really wants to hear that the project is going to be delayed via e-mail. They will want to have a real-time discussion about it. As project manager, you want to be part of that discussion, as difficult as that may be. Negative e-mails can cause people to misinterpret and misread, leading to resentment and more confusion. When discussing risks, you only want accurate information to be shared.

Remember, you are dealing with different personalities. Each situation will be different, so you need to be able to read people and learn which technique will work best for them. Some sponsors, stakeholders, and team members are naturally more open than others. If you are dealing with a negative personality, help this person to focus on the positive. Instead of entertaining the question, "Why did this happen?" in a blaming way, focus on the actions that need to be taken to move forward. Later, when you close out the project, you will look for root causes.
Nonverbal Communication

You need to project confidence in your ability to handle the risks. You don’t want to convey the image that you are upset by every minor offset. Once you are branded as that type of leader, it will be hard to change your reputation. You can project confidence both through what you say, how you say it, and what you don’t say.

When you are communicating about risks, be aware of your body language, both yours and that of your audience. Listen with your eyes as well as your ears. When you are in a face-to-face meeting, look for the following physical cues:

- **Closed posture**: Crossed arms and clenched fists signal distancing, anger, or an adversarial attitude.
- **Eyes not meeting yours or shifting away**: In most Western cultures, this indicates the person is uncomfortable with you or with what they are telling you. They may even be concealing the truth.
- **Body leaning forward**: The person shows enthusiasm and engagement in the conversation.
- **Body leaning back**: The person shows relaxation and comfort in the conversation.

You can encourage conversation by moving out from behind your desk, leaning forward slightly, allowing pauses, nodding to indicate your understanding, and avoiding answering the phone or greeting others. Reading people is an art form that can be improved over time, and it only adds to your effectiveness.