

Progress Reporting – Knowing Your Audience



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We can all agree that progress reporting is an essential part of any project and there are plenty of tools, techniques and software packages available to facilitate it. I'm sure you will have your own opinion as to reporting methods. For me, the more intriguing question is how stakeholders react to progress reports, particularly those reports with unfavourable messages. By its nature reporting is about facts and data but often, for the report recipients, their response is an emotional one. As anyone who has generated a progress report will know there's always a point in your thought process where you contemplate how the report will be received, causing you to think twice as to the words you use or the strength of the message you state. Progress reporting is never purely analytical and emotionless.

It's also useful to understand how progress reporting is perceived within an organisation's culture; a force for good governance or a burden to endure, a distraction. For any project team a progress report that highlights failings can be tough to take, that's natural. We are all humans, and no one likes criticism. But a negative report is not only good for the project in the long term, as it stimulates action, but it presents an opportunity for learning and personal development. Reports encourage us to reflect and therefore gain wisdom through experience. A company's culture needs to embrace this concept for its reporting to work effectively.

You can define progress reporting as the "gathering of information to produce a consolidated status report" but this underplays its fundamental purpose. Progress reporting is the conduit between action and consequence, a sub process within a wider series of project governance steps. The progress report should provoke a response. A report that requires managers to take action is a good report. But, sadly, it's often not received that way.

Even though management styles and leadership skills have evolved significantly over the last decade, it is more than likely that you have encountered individuals who demonstrate one of the following traits making the reporting process more challenging:

The Denier

- A colleague who never accepts the report. It is easier for them to rail against the process and undermine confidence in the output.
- This behaviour is often driven by a sense of loss of control or a personal fear of failure. They are unlikely to be a team player.

Shoot the Messenger

- The person who does not like to hear bad news, takes it personally and reacts negatively to the report author.
- They will be known for their emotional outbursts and see bad news as a threat. They are not good at managing stress.

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Homework Marker

- The Manager who's focus is inaccuracies in the report. They are fixated on its quality rather than the actions it should provoke.
- They are perfectionists whose behaviour can adversely impact productivity and deadlines.

Feed the Beast

- The stakeholder who seeks more information or wants the data presented in different ways.
- They will have firmly held views and are looking for the report content to support their opinion.

These might be the more extreme types, but I highlight them to illustrate a point; the audience is made up of a diverse group of personalities with their own foibles and prejudices. Project teams should never lose sight of this fact.

So, what do you do?

For any project team reporting is as much about stakeholder management and how the report is “delivered” to its audience as it is about the report content. Firing off an email with a report containing bad news will not land well and the project team will spend time reacting to the emotional fallout rather than addressing the issue at hand. Successful reporting is established at the outset of the project through the framework, process and expectations set by the team with the stakeholders and report recipients. The project team need to consider the following:

Delivery

- Understand the personality types of the report audience and define the strategy for how best to deliver the report findings to them; presentation, governance meeting, one to one, telephone call etc.
- Set expectations with the stakeholders as to goals of the reporting process and their role as a report recipient to make decisive decisions and act.

Accuracy

- Ensure source data is consistent and reliable.
- Measurements should be clear to understand with no ambiguity or subjective interpretation i.e. done or not done.

Relevance

- Ensure the report content is of enough detail to provide an adequate picture of status and enables stakeholders to make informed decisions.
- Adding superfluous data because it is existing or will make an attractive graph does not add value.

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Timely

- Availability of data such as financials will be driven by the company's monthly consolidation cycles, but schedule progress and critical risks and issues status must to be reviewed on a weekly basis.
- Extended reporting cycles will inadvertently allow issues to exacerbate.

Consider good reporting as a **DART** (Delivery, Accuracy, Relevance, Timely) hitting the bullseye.

For the report recipients is it all about their mindset and their understanding of their role in supporting the project. They should see a negative report as an opportunity to add value to the project and the company as an overall, a conduit to identify improvements and support team development.

Report recipients should be mindful to demonstrates the following traits:

- Don't take it personally. You all have a shared goal to ensure the project is successful.
- Understand that the report is not the end of the process but the trigger for your involvement in project governance.
- Be open to what the report is telling you. You may disagree, but it should not be ignored. Discuss your concerns with the project team.
- Be willing to make decisive decisions and take prompt actions.

Progress reporting can be a thankless task made all the worse by individual's reactions to it. But with the right framework and mindset across the entire team progress reporting and the governance process it underpins can be the difference between project success or failure. Embrace it and everyone wins.

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