The Cost of Poor Communication

No one knows exactly how much poor communication costs business, industry and government each year, but estimates suggest billions. In fact, a recent estimate claims that the cost in the U.S. alone are close to $4 billion annually![1] Poorly-worded or inefficient emails, careless reading or listening to instructions, documents that go unread due to poor design, hastily presenting inaccurate information, sloppy proofreading — all of these examples result in inevitable costs. The problem is that these costs aren't usually included on the corporate balance sheet at the end of each year, so often the problem remains unsolved.

You may have seen the Project Management Tree Cartoon before (Figure 1.4.1); it has been used and adapted widely to illustrate the perils of poor communication during a project (you can make your own version at ProjectCartoon.com!).

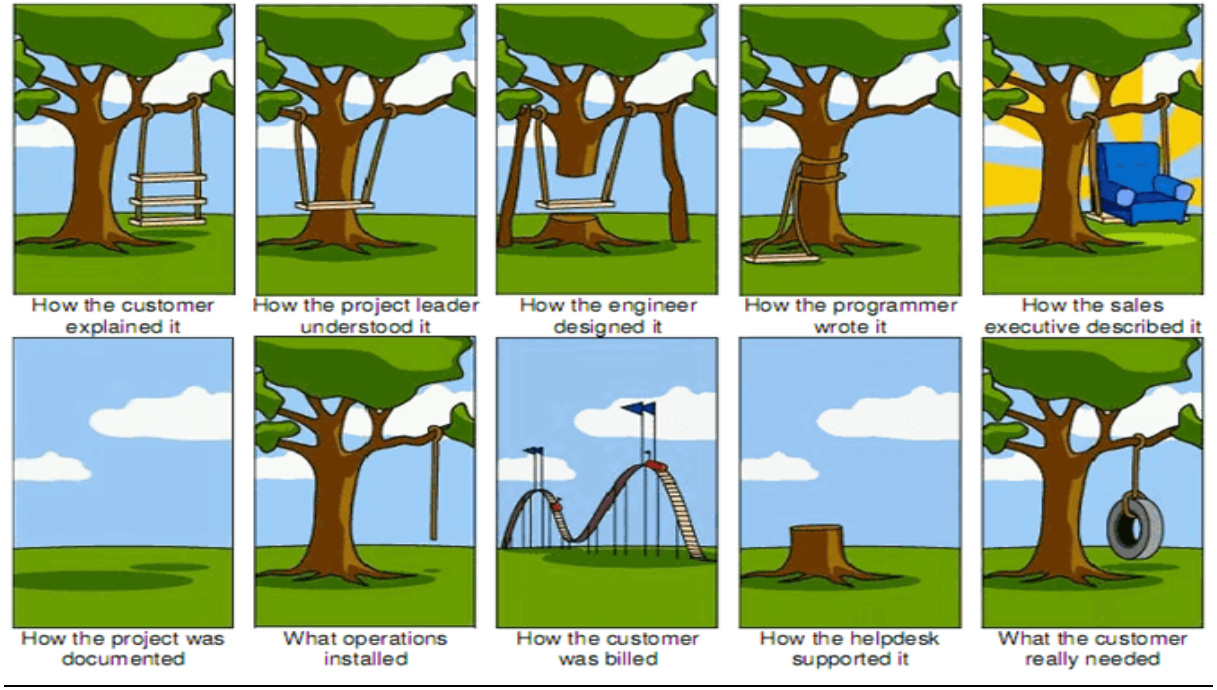

Figure 1.4.1 Project Management Tree Swing Cartoon.

The waste caused by imprecisely worded regulations or instructions, confusing emails, long-winded memos, ambiguously written contracts, and other examples of poor communication is not as easily identified as the losses caused by a bridge collapse or a flood. But the losses are just as real—in reduced productivity, inefficiency, and lost business. In more personal terms, the losses are measured in wasted time, work, money, and ultimately, professional recognition. In extreme cases, losses can be measured in property damage, injuries, and even deaths.
The following "case studies" show how poor communications can have real world costs and consequences. For example, consider the "Comma Quirk" in the Rogers Contract that cost $2 million.[3] A small error in spelling a company name cost £8.8 million.[4] Examine Tufte's discussion (.pdf) of the failed PowerPoint presentation that attempted to prevent the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster.[5] The failure of project managers and engineers to communicate effectively resulted in the deadly Hyatt Regency walkway collapse.[6] The case studies below offer a few more examples that might be less extreme, but much more common.

In small groups, examine each "case" and determine the following:

1. Define the rhetorical situation: Who is communicating to whom about what, how, and why? What was the goal of the communication in each case?
2. Identify the communication error (poor task or audience analysis? Use of inappropriate language or style? Poor organization or formatting of information? Other?)
3. Explain what costs/losses were incurred by this problem.
4. Identify possible solutions or strategies that would have prevented the problem, and what benefits would be derived from implementing solutions or preventing the problem.

CASE 1: The promising chemist who buried his results

Bruce, a research chemist for a major petro-chemical company, wrote a dense report about some new compounds he had synthesized in the laboratory from oil-refining by-products. The bulk of the report consisted of tables listing their chemical and physical properties, diagrams of their molecular structure, chemical formulas and computer printouts of toxicity tests. Buried at the end of the report was a casual speculation that one of the compounds might be a particularly effective insecticide.

Seven years later, the same oil company launched a major research program to find more effective but environmentally safe insecticides. After six months of research, someone uncovered Bruce's report and his toxicity tests. A few hours of further testing confirmed that one of Bruce's compounds was the safe, economical insecticide they had been looking for.

Bruce had since left the company, because he felt that the importance of his research was not being appreciated.

CASE 2: The unaccepted current regulator proposal

The Acme Electric Company worked day and night to develop a new current regulator designed to cut the electric power consumption in aluminium plants by 35%. They knew that, although the competition was fierce, their regulator could be produced more cheaply, was more reliable, and worked more efficiently than the competitors' products.

The owner, eager to capture the market, personally but somewhat hastily put together a 120-page proposal to the three major aluminium manufacturers, recommending that their regulators be installed at all company plants.

She devoted the first 87 pages of the proposal to the mathematical theory and engineering design behind his new regulator, and the next 32 to descriptions of the new assembly line she planned to set up to produce regulators quickly. Buried in an appendix were the test results that compared her regulator's performance with present models, and a poorly drawn graph showed how much the dollar savings would be.

Acme Electric didn't get the contracts, despite having the best product. Six months later, the company filed for bankruptcy.

CASE 3: The instruction manual the scared customers away

As one of the first to enter the field of office automation, Sagatec Software, Inc. had built a reputation for designing high-quality and user-friendly database and accounting programs for business and industry. When they decided to enter the word-processing market, their engineers designed an effective, versatile, and powerful program that Sagatec felt sure would outperform any competitor.

To be sure that their new word-processing program was accurately documented, Sagatec asked the senior program designer to supervise writing the instruction manual. The result was a thorough, accurate and precise description of every detail of the program's operation.

When Sagatec began marketing its new word processor, cries for help flooded in from office workers who were so confused by the massive manual that they couldn't even find out how to get started. Then several business journals reviewed the program and judged it "too complicated" and "difficult to learn." After an impressive start, sales of the new word processing program plummeted.

Sagatec eventually put out a new, clearly written training guide that led new users step by step through introductory exercises and told them how to find commands quickly. But the rewrite cost Sagatec $350,000, a year's lead in the market, and its reputation for producing easy-to-use business software.

CASE 4: One garbled memo – 26 baffled phone calls

Joanne supervised 36 professionals in 6 city libraries. To cut the costs of unnecessary overtime, she issued this one-sentence memo to her staff:

When workloads increase to a level requiring hours in excess of an employee's regular duty assignment, and when such work is estimated to require a full shift of eight (8) hours or more on two (2) or more consecutive days, even though unscheduled days intervene, an employee's tour of duty shall be altered so as to include the hours when such work must be done, unless an adverse impact would result from such employee's absence from his previously scheduled assignment.

After the 36 copies were sent out, Joanne's office received 26 phone calls asking what the memo meant. What the 10 people who didn't call about the memo thought is uncertain. It took a week to clarify the new policy.

CASE 5: Big science — little rhetoric

The following excerpt is from Carl Sagan's book, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*,[8] itself both a plea for and an excellent example of clear scientific communication:

The Superconducting Supercollider (SSC) would have been the preeminent instrument on the planet for probing the fine structure of matter and the nature of the early Universe. Its price tag was $10 to $15 billion. It was cancelled by Congress in 1993 after about $2 billion had been spent — a worst of both worlds outcome. But *this* debate was not, I think, mainly about declining interest in the support of science. Few in Congress understood what modern high-energy accelerators are for. They are not for weapons. They have no practical applications. They are for something that is, worrisomely from the point of view of many, called "the theory of everything." Explanations that involve entities called quarks, charm, flavour, colour, etc., sound as if physicists are being cute. The whole thing has an aura, in the view of at least some Congress people I've talked to, of "nerds gone wild" — which I suppose is an uncharitable way of describing curiosity-based science. No one asked to pay for this had the foggiest idea of what a Higgs boson is. I've read some of the material intended to justify the SSC. At the very end, some of it wasn't too bad, but there was nothing that really addressed what the project was about on a level accessible to bright but skeptical non-physicists. If physicists are asking for 10 or 15 billion dollars to build a machine that has no practical value, at the very least they should make an extremely serious effort, with dazzling graphics, metaphors, and capable use of the English language, to justify their proposal. More than financial mismanagement, budgetary constraints, and political incompetence, I think this is the key to the failure of the SSC.

CASE 6: The co-op student who mixed up genres

Chris was simultaneously enrolled in a university writing course and working as a co-op student at the Widget Manufacturing plant. As part of his co-op work experience, Chris shadowed his supervisor/mentor on a safety inspection of the plant, and was asked to write up the results of the inspection in a **compliance memo**. In the same week, Chris's writing instructor assigned the class to write a narrative essay based on some personal experience. Chris, trying to be efficient, thought that the plant visit experience could provide the basis for his essay assignment as well.

He wrote the essay first, because he was used to writing essays and was pretty good at it. He had never even seen a compliance memo, much less written one, so was not as confident about that task. He began the essay like this:

On June 1, 2018, I conducted a safety audit of the Widget Manufacturing plant in New City. The purpose of the audit was to ensure that all processes and activities in the plant adhere to safety and handling rules and policies outlined in the Workplace Safety Handbook and relevant government regulations. I was escorted on a 3-hour tour of the facility by…

Chris finished the essay and submitted it to his writing instructor. He then revised the essay slightly, keeping the introduction the same, and submitted it to his co-op supervisor. He "aced" the essay, getting an A grade, but his supervisor told him that the report was unacceptable and would have to be rewritten – especially the beginning, which should have clearly indicated whether or not the plant was in compliance with safety regulations. Chris was aghast! He had never heard of putting the "conclusion" at the **beginning**. He missed the company softball game that Saturday so he could rewrite the report to the satisfaction of his supervisor.

Case Study-7

Improving the Listening Skills of Managers at Procter & Gamble

Introduction-

The managers of Procter & Gamble (P&G) are highly trained professionals. They work under heavy time pressures and tight deadlines. As a result of this, the managers were not listening effectively to customers and co-workers.

LEAD GROUP

To improve the listening skills of the employees and managers, the Research and Development (R&D) department conducted a programme for middle managers and technical leaders. A group 'Leaders Effect. A Difference (LEAD) was formed to attend that programme. The objective of the LEAD group was to increase innovation and build lasting relationships to increase long-term networking.

The participants of the LEAD group could obtain the following benefits:

- Recognize the complexities of work issues.
- Accept the senior management expectation.
- Recognize the importance of helping others to solve their work issues.

The program for a LEAD groups begins with a 45 minute introduction to LEAD process and is followed by building in-depth listening skills. Listening is the main point of coaching: hence it plays a critical role in developing coaching.

The lead group was structured into groups of six persons. Participants were asked to play the role of helper and observer. Each member of group was assigned the role of seeker for one of the six LEAD sessions.

The seeker was assigned the role of practicing the skills of helping others on work issues. The helper was assigned the role of practicing listening and training skills with the aim of assisting the seeker to think, feel, and plan.

Outcome of the LEAD group

Over time, the LEAD group program was effective in motivating listening skills of managers. The LEAD group approach met the business need for improved coaching by managers and was successful in establishing communication with broader network of employees.

Discussion Questions:

1. Give the reason which made the managers ineffective listeners?
2. What are the benefits of LEAD group program to the participants?

Case Study-8

FOCs Written Communication Programme

The foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) initiated a programme, Professional Skills for Government (PSG) to develop professional skills for its civil service employees and foster long term goals of improvement by imparting skill in the employees to carry out their work effectively.

Objectives of the Programme

FCO identified effective written communication as the most important skill that all employees had to master depending on their grade and responsibilities. The main objectives of the communication skill enhancement programme were to:

- Review and adopt key principals of effective writing.
- Add Value to written communication skills of each employee.
- Minimise the time spent on redrafting documents.

Challenges

Some of the most important challenges to achieve the objectives were:

- To gain the interest and attention of the employees at all levels.
- To ensure that all the current guidelines of FCO for drafting and writing are incorporated into the programme.
- To adopt follow-on coaching sessions to each employee's personal objectives.

Solutions

To meet the objectives and overcome the challenges the following strategies were adopted in the training programmes:

- Two programmes 'Effective Writing' and 'Writing with Impact' were planned and carried out. These programmes were developed considering employees at different levels.
- In order to develop specific skills, two follow-up individual coaching sessions are offered to each employee. The employees work closely with the trainer and they use authentic business documents to ensure that the required skill are targeted appropriately during the training.

Result

The employees showed great interest and regularly attended the programme. Employees' confidence and accuracy in written communication increased. This has decreased the repeated redrafting of documents and improved efficiency.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the written communication programme objectives of FCO?

2. How did FCO's written communication programme overcome the challenges to meet the objectives?