

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE COMPANY: PREMISE OF SUCCESS FOR IT PROJECTS

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Abstract: *The human behaviour during the communication process is influenced first of all by human relations and by the degree of existing harmony. Subjectivity always exists but the exercise done in development of soft skills by improving own methods and ways of acting is showing the right direction to an effective communication.*

Communication process is based, according to some authors, on four stages and these ones have to be completed in order to perceive in a right way the interpersonal communication in all kind of projects and especially in the ones of IT technology.

Another important point is the fulfilment of business ethics, which is done on a different way in different kind of companies and different kind of projects. Sometimes, it is assumed in a wrong way that the implementation or optimisation of a performant system „covers“ the skill of interpersonal communication as well. The experience is showing that especially for IT projects, the interpersonal communication is a prerequisite for the success of the project, and fortunately a value that was always present in the characteristic of human beings. It has only to be brought to the surface on the right time, on the right place. In the article are used bibliographical sources from the German region as well.

Keywords: *interpersonal communication, business ethics, personal behaviour, communication management, cooperation, motivation.*

Before revealing the importance of communication for companies' projects in general and especially for IT projects, a short investigation of human behaviour at the moment of communication will be carried out.

The critical attribute in communication is represented by the inter-human relationship. In this kind of relationships, harmony is the key to

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actual communication. Trust in the persons involved in the communication arises gradually out of this harmony. Communication requires certain qualities and developing such qualities requires exercise.

Communication is so important in all spheres of the human activities; for example Jürgen Habermas, developed recently a “communicational ethics”¹. He is starting by the premise that decisions may be rationalized, only in the processes of human communication and in the same manner, the human behaviour can be legitimized from an economic, legal, political and – at last but not least - ethical point of view.

Generally, the human being tends to form an (almost) always subjective image about other persons’ actions or opinions. Situations created or expressed by somebody else are perceived according to own outlook on things and truthfulness of those perceived is questioned.²

The above mentioned and required “exercise” consists in shaping one’s own way of considering inter-human relationships (not to presume ill meaning and to be open-minded to new situations or – what is more – to situations otherwise contemplated by the interlocutor), as well as in improving one’s behaviour (to understand, the one must listen and to be understood, the one must speak).

This premise of the communication exercising and enhancing does not imply anything new so long as the exercise represents a natural action as the need to train for various sports or to learn for being successful in an intellectual or professional activity.

Similarly, the efficient communication in the company, in projects and not only, should be natural. The notion of communication must be understood thoroughly and appreciated in order to increase projects’ efficiency during their execution or subsequently.

In order to show clearly where problems of communication can arise in a company, before presenting the general importance of interpersonal communication in the company and through projects’ implementation, the basic factors and stages of the communication as Marshall Rosenberg explains them in his model of non-violent communication will be analysed. This analysis is meant to underline the importance of communication – not as fundamental criteria of a project, but as an actual

¹ Habermas, Jürgen, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983, pg.30-42.

² Covey, Stephen R., *Die effektive Führungspersönlichkeit*, Campus Verlag, 2009, pg. 82 – 85.

factor of survival of long-term projects product – irrespective of the company, its field of activity or the type of project implemented.

Thus, further to a general view of the notion of communication and the mentioned exercise necessity, four stages are the basis of interpersonal communication process, and the basis of communication enhancement and efficiency: perceptive faculty, expressing the feelings, expressing the needs, request.³

As Beate Brüggemeier says in her paper relating to the so-called “appreciative” communication, the above stages represent more than an actual model of communication: taking into account these stages, one can detect the position of a person with respect to what is important, what is communicated, own ideas and particularly such person’s position as regards other persons’ ideas. In the appreciative communication, the interlocutor’s needs and the correct perception thereof are crucial for the communication process. Actions are carried out responsibly and co-operatively.

First Stage: Perceptive Faculty

When the process of perception of an action or a person starts, the communication with the concerned person is actually initiated. The perceptive faculty is essential in the complex process of communication, practically in all the areas of everyday life or in business, projects, etc.

It should be noted that in communication, namely in order to create an efficient basis of communication, the perception itself must not be mixed with or mistaken for the evaluation of the perceived person or action. Perception must be carried out as objectively as possible, without adding an evaluation of what is to happen or to be said. To put it differently, when the result of perceiving a person or an activity is turned into words, such action should not contain assumptions or hypotheses, categorizations of what has been perceived; in this case, it is about a certain relativity of the objective perception.

To reach a common denominator with the interlocutor, and only subsequently to the perception process, questions will be asked, differences in ideas will be discussed, explanations concerning every interlocutor’s manner of analysing the situation will be offered.

³ Brüggemeier, Beate, *Wertschätzende Kommunikation*, Junfermann, 2010, pg.21-22.

This factor of communication, called the “perceptive faculty”, is permanently active in corporate projects; in IT projects, it is extremely important. Perceiving in time the actions in a project, whether it is about project planning, implementation of a module, training or support, leads to risk control in the project, as well as to a greater satisfaction of those working with the concerned product or implementing it: a detected risk can be permanently kept under control.

Second Stage: Expressing the Feelings

It is very important that this factor is understood objectively and it is not confused with the emotional character of communication.

Every human being is crossed over by feelings and showing these feelings takes place on the appearance of communication, no matter if it is wanted or not. It's the starting point for an analysis of the feelings in communication. As long as an individual is aware of showing his or her own feelings, he or she will always have the possibility to control them. What really happens is more or less connected to control.

In studying the communication concept and processes, Sigmund Freud's Iceberg model is often mentioned. The objective level is the iceberg part above the water surface and it represents in between 16 and 20% of the entire message, which is communicated (there are various opinions with respect to the exact percentage, but the basic idea is the same).

The relational or “subjective” level (feelings, emotions, fears, wishes, etc.) is given by the part of the Iceberg under the water and it represents the remaining of the message.

Problems do not arise in the communication at the objective level. Such problems arise as a result of the high percentage of the relational communication, which depends of feelings and fears.⁴

Returning to the subject matter and considering the importance of the “feelings” factor in projects, one can discern various reserves arising in the company in respect to this factor but, at the same time, it is the outstanding factor in communication. Often, open and objective communication is intended or preached (that is, the objective level of communication), denying the existence of such feelings as fear of failure or the problems that might arise out of employees' feelings. Therefore, communication pertaining to the emotional state, personal fears or wishes

⁴ Brüggemeier, Beate, *Wertschätzende Kommunikation*, Junfermann, 2010, pg.34.

- in relation to the project's subject or not - is noticed. Time and again, decision-making staff of the company or of the projects to be implemented does not take such fears seriously, in spite of the fact that frequently it comes to employees' resignations or to partial or full failure of a project.

Should it be possible to successfully overcome this problem or communication stage through clarifying the situation in any phase of the project or of any activity - namely by a rigorous clarification of the feelings of the concerned persons (participants in the project, users, etc.) and of all those who communicate almost exclusively at the relational level and not at the objective level, then a large part of the problems resulting from the communication process between hierarchical levels or at the same hierarchical level would be solved in time.

Third Stage: Own Needs

To be able to explain the meaning of this stage of communication, one must permanently ask the question "What is the current need?" The answer to this question represents the needs of every individual. The risk to mistake the utterance of the need for the creation of a strategy behind such need is present in this stage too.

One's own needs should be clearly uttered, not only privately, but also in the professional environment - in this case in projects implementation. In fact, needs are the basic rules in projects (punctuality, works completion in time, users' training, etc.). For defining the final strategy (e.g. using the new IT product to increase the rapidity of deliveries), it is first necessary to know exactly the project needs. Consequently, the motivation of the users - of the people responsible for deliveries - intensifies, knowing the purpose of the above-mentioned strict rules of the project. In this way, the risk of uncertainty regarding the work already done or the precise programme to be maintained does not arise.

However, it appears frequently that strategy prevails over communication, while the needs behind such strategy are unknown or merely presumed. This problem arises at various hierarchical levels and it bars the way to efficiency in communication.

Fourth Stage: Expressing a Certain Need by Request

This last stage of the process of communication represents the utterance of wishes and requests in a certain way so as to reach one's goal by creating the transparency.

This fourth and last stage is sometimes indirectly considered as uncertain, for fear that the openness of the person who expresses the request would be too obvious; expressing the strategy without clearly expressing the needs (waiving the third stage) is preferred.

Nonetheless, maintaining the four stages of the process of communication is extremely necessary in companies and in projects implementation.

In the case of IT projects, the fourth stage, that is, expressing the request to carry out a certain activity – request that may be similar to tasks delegating – is very important; the request or utterance of the activities to be assigned must be specific, clear and it should contain all the necessary details to enable the carrying out of such activities.

Business Ethics as a Means to Reach Project's Target

Undoubtedly, business ethics is the foundation of these stages of communication.

We may also mention here a certain moral in business but, as defined by philosophers, the notion of moral is too exact and dogmatic, and it might give rise to an inclination to believe that it is a conservative concept. "Ethics" notion is impersonal, objective and constant⁵; for this reason, the notion of "business ethics" is used in this article.

The notion of business ethics will be used with the meaning of "a set of principles and arguments that should govern the business", according to P. V. Lewis.⁶

Moral values and norms, that is, an ethical code that should form the basis of communication, is often mentioned in companies' projects with the intention to be taken into account. Still, Plato's idea, which brings a misanthropic argument namely that "*people act rather for egotistic reasons than for other reasons or principles*", should not be disregarded.⁷

Then again, this idea can be easily turned into a hypothesis, which can have an effect on a project positive progress: for instance, project managers act with the intention of fulfilling their own objectives. Seeing that the project progress is to their advantage, they will put into practice the ethics notions, as they are confident that this is the way to keep the

⁵ Crăciun, Dan, Vasile, Morar, Vasile, Macoviciuc, *Business Ethics*, Bucharest, Paidea Publishing, 2005, pg.4.

⁶ Ibidem, pg.9.

⁷ Dan, Crăciun, Vasile Morar, Vasile Macoviciuc, *Business Ethics*, Bucharest, Paidea Publishing, 2005, pg.37.

project and the personnel involved in it at a certain level of motivation in order to reach their target.

At first sight, this method seems not to be quite “orthodox” and a certain strategy used by the project manager behind the communication stages is noticed. However, the fact that the consequences of using such ethical methods (permanent communication for the duration of the project, dialogue for seeking solutions, permanent training, maintaining the motivation) are in line with the project target, while employees remain motivated throughout the project should not be disregarded.

Hence, a project manager having the personal objective – agreed with his/her own boss – to reduce maintenance costs will act for improving the communication in the project, if the reason for which communication planning during the project decisively contributes to minimizing the costs after completion of project is explained to him/her.

Should the same project manager have as personal objective to reduce project costs, the consequences will be the desertion of communication planning and the reduction of the investment for users’ training to a minimum. In this case, the communication requirement should be presented under another form, so that the project manager would also meet his or her objective. For instance, it will be proved to the project manager that the critical factors for project’s costs reduction are the thorough planning of the personnel, including holidays planning, as well as the involvement of key users in the project as soon as from the planning stage, by using the “train the trainer” model – users’ training by the key users.

Going further into the analysis, it may be said that dialogue for the duration of the project and with the project product’s users has been probably slightly forced – in an indirect way – but it created an advantage for all the participants in the project. Even if individuals do not permanently abide by their own moral values (which they more or less possess), it is sufficient that the means to reach their goals be ethical or moral and that such means be fully understood by them. In such conditions, nobody gives up the ethic or the moral thoughts as long as it can be proved that ethical or moral principles lead to purpose achievement. Such proof is present in any situation.

Considering also the above mentioned stages of communication, the idea of applying ethics concepts to business – in the planned process of communication for projects – should rest on the objectives of the decision making persons of the concerned project. It goes without saying that the

company, as well as the project, follow up certain targets and decision-making persons or sponsors of the project are selected so that their purposes would comply with project's purposes.

Interpersonal Communication in various companies and projects

Finally, a certain degree of empathy with the interlocutor is developed to make the communication possible. This state of things is present in private, as well as in any company regardless of its size. The importance attached to communication is, obviously, different and it depends sometimes on the company size, oldness and culture.

Companies whose number of employees has increased in time have a rather complex hierarchical structure and, consequently, the importance of the communication increased with such complexity.

The more extended the activity of a company and implicitly the larger the employees' number, the greater the importance of the communication in project implementation.

For that reason, interpersonal communication is more and more important as company's activities and the assignment thereof on the hierarchical scale are more complex and require a larger number of personnel.

In the case of the newly established companies, interpersonal communication is essential from the very beginning; communication and publicity in respect of the way the new company communicates are practically methods to attract customers, sponsors, etc.

Notwithstanding their size, companies where the management dedicates considerable room for communication with the employees or between employees (communication description in detail might be used as means to achieve the targets...) can enjoy certain stability in maintaining the personnel, work efficiency and employees' trust.

Consequently, such companies have understood the concept of interpersonal communication as an indirect, but significant method of economic efficiency growth. In such cases, employees' loyalty is increasing and thus the main premise of success in implementing various projects or techniques is automatically created.

To return to the projects of implementation of new technologies or of upgrading the old ones, such projects require a careful examination with regard to interpersonal communication. The reason can be explained as follows:

It is human to be inclined to minimize the importance of this type of communication in IT projects: as long as a state-of-the-art system exists – based on the correct commands – and it ensures the increase of company's efficiency and the rapid carrying out of economic procedures, the inclination to give up communication is almost a reflex and, unfortunately, a long term disadvantage for the implemented or optimized technological platform.

To avoid the risk of minimizing the interpersonal communication value in every IT project, it is necessary to allocate various activities meant to the permanent promotion of interpersonal communication.

Unfortunately, the minimization in time of the importance attached to the idea of communication in business can be noticed, especially in companies, which used to enjoy a certain technological success in the past and now are in a position of maintaining it. The four stages of communication mentioned herein above are not applied anymore; only the final strategy is still communicated and even this is poorly done.

No matter if it is about group discussions – which are periodical in the planning stage of project implementation – processes clarification and their “turning into technology” or about jointly performed tests and presentation of results, it is necessary for the employees who are directly or indirectly involved in the IT project to have the possibility of permanently communicating with the decision making persons in the execution and development of the project, as well as with the consulting group that implements and optimizes the product.

Therefore, the fact that technology is not (yet) able to replace the wishes expressed by a customer or the problems of a supplier must be taken into consideration. Employees have the capability to communicate with the supplier or with the customer, as well as the possibility to customize the system so that supplier or customer's requirements (delivery conditions, payment, comments, etc.) could be parameterized and measured to enable the efficient operation of the IT technology. The personnel affected by the IT product implementation or optimization know these factors; consequently, communication with the employees is vital for the success of the project.

As long as interpersonal communication, marked by empathy, passes through every stage of communication, it results in understanding the objectives of the interlocutor, whether inside or outside the company.

Thus, the implementation or optimisation of a specific technology develops the premises for becoming a sustainable technology in the concerned company.

It has also to be taken into account that, as Jürgen Habermas tried to explain in his theory of communicative act that the human being proceeds rationally oriented and the rationality is build inside and through communicative acts: from the simple to the complex ones; from the banal ones to those full of risk and uncertainty; this is also a way of doing communication.⁸

At the same time, lots of researches done in areas like evolution biology, psychology, sociology, politic sciences and economic researches are proving that the human being is not an egoist but its tendency is to cooperate and communicate⁹. So, the basis of the efficient communication exists in the human being. Probably, taking into account this hypothesis, the basis of the interpersonal communication is already done - for any kind of projects or similar activities.

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