

90. Effective Communication from the 2021 UMD Symposium

with Glenn Anderson and Richard Wyatt

Richard Wyatt: Project Managers need to spend a lot more of their time in communication rather than chasing down is Task X or Y completed, and much more time reinforcing what it is they need, and supporting the folks towards the change that you're after.

Glenn Anderson: And turn back more conversations than you take back. Every time somebody finishes talking, you have a choice: you can either turn the conversation back to them or take the conversation yourself. Turn it back.

Kendall Lott: Attenuation and illusion, the themes of the failure in communications for us as PMs. Welcome to the second episode in our three-part series of highlights from the University of Maryland's 2021 Project Management Symposium. Our focus today here is on communication, effective communication.

We start with Richard Wyatt, who analyzes the attenuation that so often occurs as messages travel from the top layers of an organization all the way down. He has some excellent recommendations for leaders and project managers who are trying to implement organizational change. And then Glenn Anderson expounds on solving team communication issues, the illusion that it has taken place.

We feature clips of the presentations along with my interviews with the presenters. And again, I highly recommend that you visit the symposium's website to listen to all the presentations in their entirety.

Announcer: From the Washington DC chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View®, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here is your host, Kendal Lott.

Kendall Lott: Communication. We know it's important. We think we're doing it. But there are infinite tripping points where a disconnect can occur. Whether it's one-on-one communication or organization-wide messaging, communication is an art. In this episode, you'll learn some handy do's and don'ts you can apply to any communication effort, so pay attention. That's half the game.

Last year, we featured two presentations by Richard Wyatt: one on the role of project managers in an Agile environment, and the other on project managers in innovation. This year, his topic is transformation attenuation. Why does it happen? And what can you do about it?

Richard Wyatt: Well I'm Richard Wyatt. I'm consulting in what I call project management remediation now, really fixing large projects or projects that have gone wrong. So I'm doing that as an independent consultant.

KL: We had you last year for two: Project Management in the Time of Agile; Project Management of Innovation. And you were looking at how a large organization handles those things, and I think as you noted, as we worked through that, it stimulated some more ideas, it sounds like. And your topic this year was Transformation Attenuation. You had me at attenuation. And so it's about the impact of organizational change, what project managers can do to increase the impact of organizational change. But this idea that there's attenuation... I'm feeling noise to signal. I'm seeing loss of signal. I think that's what we're going to be talking about here.

RW: And that's exactly it.

RW (03:23): Transformation attenuation, what do I mean by that? When I look at the pyramid, what I'm trying to represent at the top, this dark color, you've got senior execs. They're really enthusiastic, they're going to change the business, they're looking ahead to what the company is going to be in the future. They've bought in to the idea, you know, this full rich change and transformation in the organization, and typically nowadays that's more about business agility. They just see this full on 100% change.

And as you work down in an organization, I observe that sort of functional management. There they start to get this functional focus. They start to get into their day jobs, whatever they are special area is, whether it's development or production or whatever it may be. Their life starts to get colored by that, they get a bit more focused on what we need to do that day or that week.

And what happens is that full-on intent to totally transform the organization to be the best ever Agile business, let's say, it will sort of get some day-to-day in there, it starts to lose that intent, that strength. And of course, once you get down to frontline associates and whatever they're doing, whether they're working on your project or whatever they're doing, but quite often they say, "Yeah, well, we've got new tools, we've got new processes, not much else has changed. You're still breaking my back to deliver X and Y. I've still got to do these things, I've still got the phone ringing, I've got a line SAT..."

And so what happens is between these senior execs who see this full-on change and existence and the reality of the day-to-day is very different. So where does that manifest itself, and what can we do as project managers, can we do in that space?

KL (05:24): I have a multiple-choice question for you. Is this an alignment problem, this messaging from the senior down, where people are very busy, and that is having an understanding and what actions you do to map to what the senior people want? Or B, is it under-staffing? Because you went to tactical, you went to they're busy, right? So B, is it an under-staffing problem? That is, we've got people slammed at the tactical level, and they're full-time, they're maxed out. Or C, is it a design problem, organizational design problem? That is, all of your people, no matter how busy they are, or where they're sitting, should have some sense of the strategic at a portfolio level to the functional, to the tactical. That any given person should be, as part of their role, never allowed to only be in one level.

So what have we got here? Alignment, under-staffing, or a design problem?

RW: Yeah, so I'm not going to jump straight to the answer, I think alignment is critical, but you can be aligned, but you can still lose the strength of the message as you work down organization. So

you can be aligned and yet still have a loss of signal. So it's not alignment.

Under-staffing really comes down to doing the work. I actually did some research on this years ago, and we found that where people were under-staffed, they were forced to change, whereas if you gave them an extra resource to get them through the process, they really used that resource to hang on to the old ways of doing it. So to some degree, I feel some level of false restraint can be a positive thing. So it's not that.

Which leads me to C. And I do think it's a design thing, in that all the way through the organization, are people able to see and be the change, as well as understanding what that means to their specific role, whatever level they're at? So it's C.

RW (07:42): In terms of organizational readiness, there are number of pressures and dimensions on a project team. The first one really is governance. Are there lots of the levels in the organization? Is it command and control-oriented, you know, you can't do anything without your manager agreeing, and then if you want to talk to a different group, you've really got to go through your manager. And that's a bit extreme, but it's how strict and rigid, and how many layers are there in the governance?

So that's sort of one dimension to organizational readiness. Another one that I've been focused on a lot in the last two years is the impact of control functions. And that would be risk, it would be finance, it would be HR. So they're not part per se of the delivery of whatever the organization is there to deliver; they have their own things they have to mind across the organization. And I think one of the things that we'll talk about a bit later is they sort of come at this change with a different view. "No, I've got to manage risk, we are a risk-averse, financial fiduciary that is regulated..." And yet I'm trying to make a change, make the organization much more Agile. So there can be a clash from the side, if you will, from these different control functions.

And then in terms of governance also, I see a lot where the senior executives of an organization may want to change to this...whatever the transformation is about. But within the organization, there are still pockets that are managed in an old paradigm. You know, if you want something from a supporting group, you've got to go through their work intake, for example. If you don't do that, well, "Sorry, we can't help you."

So first is governance. How are you as a team governed? How is the organization governed?

The next big one is dependencies. And dependencies are the biggest thing that's going to slow down transformation or stop a transformation in its tracks. You may want to do something different, but if you're dependent on, let's just say, especially a resource that's just not available, then those dependencies can just stop your progress. And people often forget when you go back to lean, those who are in lean organizations know that the idea is to optimize the factory, not to organize any one group. And what you'll see in big companies frequently is that a local manager will try not optimize their group, even if it causes back-ups in working progressing in other areas. And that again, that's a dependency that will just completely slow down any transformation.

Structure. How is the organization structured? How is the team structured, can have a big impact on how you can move forward and how ready the organization is. And I'll talk a bit later about later, you know, in terms of structure, if you are going to something that's more agile in nature, you know, flat as an organization, quick communication key as opposed to more rigid hierarchy.

And then again measurement. Measurement takes, as we'll see, many different forms, many different directions, and it can be very confusing as to what is measured, and ultimately that can have obviously a huge impact on what people do. So we as project managers want to move something forward, and these are areas we've got to look at. Because before we start, if some of these road blocks are in place, or speed bumps are in place, our job is going to be a heck of a lot harder.

KL (11:44): You really flagged a lot around dependencies as an element of good readiness, and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that, even beyond your presentation. What do you see as difficult? I mean, we deal with dependencies as project managers. How is it that you're seeing dependencies are conflicting or creating tension in our readiness for change?

RW: I think the critical piece there is a dependency that is well-oiled and doing well, that typically all project managers have, right? (Not really.) [Laughter] That's what we do, and that's what's everywhere. The issue is where there are dependencies where the gears are grinding, or it's a limited resource that you're after, a scarce resource or... My experience, there's a small sub-group that is perpetually late, there's some area... So there are different things in there, and I think there's nothing worse, if you're really trying to get something done, particularly when it's change-oriented, but to be continually facing with these dependencies that are in effect, road blocks. It doesn't have to be a road block, it just could be a road constriction – you're on the freeway and you go from three lanes down to one. But that's where I think dependencies become so, so important.

And you really need to, I think, get out in front of them if you're a project manager. Not just know where they are and have them on your Gantt chart, but really understand who's managing the area where there's the dependency and really know and have the relationships and be working on that well ahead of it becoming kind of an issue.

KL: I think the issue here, to me was that the number of dependencies matters. There is a certain, like a bushiness or interaction of them as they get thick, as they come intertwined. And we often think about dependencies as being key or critical, but I think the sheer number of them, it increases complexity so much. So that...the saying the quantity has its own quality, right? That having so much, it alone becomes a characteristic of how difficult the quality of difficulty happens.

And I liked your response to... one of the things I find interesting is the sub-optimization. This idea that then everyone scrambles to their own corner when faced with a conflict or the inability, it feels like they can get things done. So even if they are all maximizing in their own space, the dependencies are inherently broken.

RW: Right. You're not optimizing the factory, you're optimizing the local station.

RW (14:35): So you get what you measure. That's my measuring tape. I have a real issue, that's just me, personally, but with the traditional review cycle. We have a system, you put in at the beginning of the year what it is you're going to be reviewed on at the end of the year, and we use training and how it's going to be measurable... I don't think I've ever gone through a year where the job I had at the end of the year was the job that was in the system, as what my goals are for the year. And never has my compensation been based on whatever that system may or may not say.

To me, they tend to put in things that are easy to measure, and they aren't necessarily the things that are about the strategic transformational goals. So you have to be careful with how closely does the organization, how closely does the line manager work with the traditional review cycle in terms of what they expect for the people on the project? Because you as the project manager may have different goals.

And I think that the biggest thing here, it really is, is effort. It takes time and effort to be on top of what it is you really want from people. It's not easy to measure sometimes, you know, like leading indicators, how many people were trained? Well, that's great, but change is all about the impact you have on the customer in the end. So it's actually quite hard to measure transformational goals, and I find very frequently a line manager just wants to get through the review cycle, as opposed to you, who wants to truly make a change that's transformational in your project.

Because if I measure a task, someone's going to work on it. But if I want you to change, but I don't put any great measures around it, it's a diffuse task, there's no focus. You can clearly observe that what happens is, if it's a diffuse task and there's no direct measures, it's not going to make it to top of the list. And if you go to someone's line manager, they're not going to make their folks work hard in that direction if there are other things that are being measured.

So it's super critical to make sure that the change orientation and change tasks are measured tasks and not ones that are sort of diffuse and you don't have to do that, and no one is really watching, because that's a guaranteed way not to make a change happen.

RW (17:02): So when I look at a team, many organizations still... Each person on the team has a line manager, and that line manager has to satisfy his line manager boss, and has to achieve certain things that may or may not be in line with what it is that you're trying to do as a project manager. Again, that's not a new challenge for us, but with change management in particular, I think that can very quickly become a noticed issue. And I think the point I'd like to make is that it's sometimes very easy to let them do their thing and we just manage our project.

And it's actually quite hard to say ahead of time, "No, I'm going to partner, I'm going to go to the various different line managers that are critical, and ahead of time, I'm going to have those conversations around what it is I expect from folks, and how I need them focused on what I want and what my project needs, and not to be superseded by the line management. Because if nothing else, at least you're taking up that conversation.

KL (18:14): It appears to be that you're getting into the line manager and their role. So when I hear something like that, I'm wondering, is it related to our expectations of those roles? Have we set those folks, I mean back to the design question (you picked C already, so I guess we're there) but it strikes me, is it about our expectation of the people in those roles and how they're set up or even selected, or even incentivized?

RW: Incentivized, I think is one of the key drivers of the issue. But yeah, we hang on to this principle where you have a line manager and your line manager gives you your goals for the year based on... they get cascaded down from above. And he needs certain things though, or she... so they can be successful back up to their management chain. And you don't actually work for your line manager, you're actually working on the project. Everything is sort of project-oriented. So you've got somebody who's being measured on a certain set of criteria, who needs to meet their

goals and they directly manage and give you what you need to achieve. But it's not the person who actually is getting the words out and making the change, which is the project manager. And I find we cling to this hierarchy and it forms no function anymore.

RW (19:52): But then we get all these control functions, and one of the biggest things I've found in organizations that I've worked with is that finance...and the systems that finance has is very much geared around projects. "Oh, we can do this thing and it's got this much money, and there's a budget," right? And project managers need to be good at managing budgets. They're very budget-oriented, right? They manage the money in chunks, in burn rates and against a project, which is against, as we all know, against some deliverables.

But if you're switching to a...to something more agile, the chances are you are more of a process or a product, and that doesn't match, it doesn't match to what finance expects. It doesn't match to a project, you know, my burn rate's flat or a straight line, at least, rather.

So it's finance types that force you to do things that that don't make sense in terms of transformation. Or is finance on board? And my guess is that typically there's this sort of friction between the two. And I sort of call the project manager more of a clutch, right? So the clutch is slipping so that finance can do their project thing, but we're still going to manage the team more product/process method.

And for example, if you look at Agile or Lean, it's very much about, you know, I welcome change at the last minute, right? While a finance person who's managing your budget hates that, because I'm forever going back to them, "My budget's changed." "No." "I need more money." "No..." And that sets up a horrible series of conversations, as opposed to a partner, someone who understands in finance that you're not doing finite chunks of funding. You're doing a process. And actually you can take away their need to report. I don't need to provide a status report and a burn rate to six different people to where my every penny is going. But it requires their management to be willing to do that also.

KL (21:58): You tackle a very interesting part of the organization, a category of pieces of your organization that, much as they may be needed, are explicitly part of the problem (those are my words) the barrier, which is all of the machinery of governance and oversight. It's not the people delivering, not the people delivering on change. It's a very special part of the dependencies you have: the accounting department. The ones that are doing things for compliance. I actually work with this in the government space a lot, because that's a big part of government roles in organizations. It's not just attenuation, but it sounds to me like our governance processes are actively disrupting the signal.

RW: That is so true. So that's my point. I call them control functions. They're like finance, risk, HR, compliance, there's a whole host of them. Coming back to this point of structure with an organization creates blockages. This is partly where this inherent structure for me really blocks getting change done.

So let's take finance. So if finance is organized around piecing out budget for projects, yet the organization wants to pivot to a product orientation, but all finance is still project-based, it can't understand just funding a group for a year. It doesn't compute. So straight off... When you want to get something done, you want to make a change straight off I have a control function that is

mismatched. So now you've got to start figuring out... and I always call them, if remember last time, sort of a clutch... in between finance and a project. So the project can work in one way, but satisfy... and that's just extra non-value added work to fill the chasm between some of these control functions. And the control functions are much, much slower to let go of that which they...you know fundamentally drives their behavior. Yet they need to re-learn what finance is in business in order to become...if you're going to become more agile, as an example.

So it's a fundamental thing. So sometimes these people are very stuck in old ways that actually makes changing much, much harder.

KL: I'm suddenly thinking of this as kind of Weberian bureaucracy – Max Weber's work, right? In the sense that like, once you create these control functions, they have a reason to exist on their own and they are going to maximize and optimize on that. So it's a call actually to leadership to make sure, I think, that they're providing the value they're supposed to be.

RW: Yeah, I think that's exactly it. Someone needs to say, “Well, Finance, HR, Risk. How are you going to adapt? What are you going to do differently? Where do you change?” Because if you're not doing that simultaneously or even ahead, right? Doing it or dealing with them first, it's just going to become later a problem when IT or Product or whoever, get to that point in the change.

RW (25:34): Next, our resistance to change. So one of the things I find as a main resistance to changes is that when people feel it's just a process change, you're just changing my work, you're not really... you know, I'm not suddenly becoming this, you know... Agile kind of making money for the business, you know, exciting James Bond kind of person. You're really just telling me to move paper to there instead of over to there, and it's not motivating. And that's where you get resistance. I'm not very interested in just changing my work, I don't like change.

And so one of the things project managers can really work on is the communication about how it's much more than just changing the process, and I kind of liken this to pushing a rope. If you want to make change and you've just got people to just perceive there to be a change in process – you can't push a rope, it's not going to go anywhere, that's not how you help people if you want to do things differently.

But how do you bridge this gap between the executives who don't really see what's happening on the ground? So there's a couple of ideas I want to talk about... One was constant support of people, reinforcing the message. Again, it takes effort, and I would charge the project managers need to spend a lot more of their time in the communication rather than chasing down is Task X or Y completed, much more time reinforcing what it is they need and supporting the folks towards the change that you're after. We need to figure out how to let go of some of the tasks, of chasing some of the detail, and spend more time on some of these communication areas.

KL (27:23): You have a graphic and you call it The Community Chasm.

RW: Yeah.

KL: I thought I was connecting to “chasm.” “Gap,” was how I was feeling. But the community? What is this community of which you speak?

RW: Yeah, so when I look at an organization broadly, I see it as a group of people who are trying to, together, get a certain set of things done. So if you take away the hierarchy, the command and control, perhaps, you end up with this community of people who are all trying to achieve something on behalf of clients and customers. So that's the community. And then the chasm piece is the gap between what strategic-thinking leadership does, thinks is going on, and say the people doing the work.

And I think many times a hierarchy makes that worse, or creates a problem there. And I think Elon Musk, he said you need to be able to go and talk to the person you need to talk to. If they're in another division, then you just should be able to go talk to them, because you're a community. (But he didn't say that, that's my added bit to his wisdom.) But you don't need to go up through a hierarchy and back down again. You just need people to talk to who you need to talk to, to get the problem solved.

So that's really what this idea of community chasm is – is the gaps between people. And it's typically created by the organization.

KL (29:06): You end with getting on the need to have trust. All of sudden we're back...we're past like soft skills, we're talking about *trust*. And I keep hearing that in this year around project management and things related to the management discipline generally. What took you to that?

RW: I think, certainly in my career, certainly early on, and I've been at this a good... I hate to say it, but a number of decades. But what is this “project manager” is really... It's almost managing stuff by contract. So I'm going to spec what you need to do. I'm going to define it so well there's no wiggle room, and you're going to deliver it on the day you promised. So there's no trust. In fact, what project management really is about is to say, “I don't trust anybody, and you're going to have to prove to me that you're going to do it when you said, and how, and exactly what was done up front.” And I think when you look at it, you could say that that's where trust went.

Trust went when we didn't trust anybody. And that's why we had... again, I call it project by contract, or by lawyer almost, isn't it? The nature of it is there's no trust.

So I think as you want to get more agile and you want to make changes and we're breaking away to different ways of doing things, like for example, what we just talked about with finance, you're no longer managing these discreet small budgets, there needs to be that level of trust between finance and the groups that are spending on a constant basis.

What's going on, and there needs to be trust between product and IT that we actually are going to deliver. You no longer are going to get these project quanta of work back per the contract we signed at the beginning of the project. It's going to be this continual delivery going forward. So yes, so all of a sudden, everyone needs to start trusting each other because we were doing away with this layer of contracts. And that's where I see the huge change. And what holds people back is reverting to this, “Oh my God, now you've got to... You've got to do this and you've got to do it by that date.”

So yes, so trust needs to be rebuilt as you strip back some of these very strict processes. When you take some of these strict structures away, people feel exposed, and the only way that works is when we start to trust each other.

KL (31:45): Wow, community and chasm are a group of people trying to perform mission, that's community. And the strategy that isn't leaping across from each person, brain to brain, that's the problem, because the organizational structure gets in the way. And our structure creates the chasm.

Effective transformation requires good and constant supportive communication. And so it's a design problem. And per his conversation of last year, you've heard that those overhead functions that manage risk within the organization push against innovation. Well, they also push on our change signal. Governance itself drives the attenuation.

Wyatt's point seems to be that your vision of a state-of-the-art future-facing organization will get lost in the quotidian reality of established processes and tasks. And watch for sub-optimization. That is, when you have a group that's looking to see how it can persist as opposed to how it can improve function. Hierarchies serve as communication blockers. Anyone with an idea or an issue should be able to transmit it directly to the person who can use it or solve it. Flatter equals better, because the fewer dependencies and control functions you have, the better your organization will be able to flex and adapt.

We also have the recurring theme of trust. Especially in an agile environment where things are more fluid, we've got to trust the ideas, the scope realignments, the updated budgets, the requests and schedule adjustments that emerge as you move through the project of transformation.

KL (33:25): And now I'm happy to introduce Glenn Anderson, who learned a lot about the art of communication from his comedy improv days in Chicago. (Would you believe it?) Do you know that our biggest failure is not in bad communication, but in our belief that it has happened at all? It's all about giving and taking. This segment will take less than 25 minutes, so please give him now your favorable attention.

Glenn Anderson (33:49): Well, my name is Glenn Anderson. I spent 45 years working at IBM in a number of jobs: sales and management and public speaking, representing IBM at industry events. I retired from IBM a couple of years ago, and these days I have a little one-man speaking business called Glenn Anderson Speaks, where I focus on professional development, soft skills topics.

KL: Love the title, "*Solving a Team's Communication Problem...*" Okay, we've heard that a lot, but I love this, "...*the Illusion that it has Taken Place.*" So it's not just maybe that we don't do it well, but that we sometimes think we've done it.

GA (34:36): So how do we eliminate that illusion? How do we ensure that effective communication is taking place. This is how we do it. We do it by connecting with people through two steps: Capturing and keeping their favorable attention, and then gifting those people with your favorable attention.

So first of all, how do we capture and hold someone's favorable attention? Well, I would suggest that one way to do it is to begin by commanding their attention by thinking of this communication event that you're doing as a sport. Now, all sports teams have that guy on the team that, when the game is on the line, they want the ball. You know, they're the ones that say, "Give me the ball. I'll score the winning basket." "Give me the ball, I'll score the winning touch down. I'll strike the guy out." Because they are commanding attention. And this is what I would suggest the attitude you need to have as you begin this communication event. You need to think of communication as a

sport, commanding attention. What you're doing here is learning to be confident. You're commanding attention and respect, and feeling like you belong.

So what are some ways that you can do that? Well, the first way is to warm up, just like the sports guys would warm up, and the way I like to do that, the way I've done it for years and years as a teacher and a speaker is, I go for a walk. And I go for a walk and I run through in my mind, I rehearse what I'm going to be doing that day. Now, a lot of people think when you're rehearsing you should stand in front of a mirror and practice your speech, or practice what you're going to say. And my problem with that is that if you're looking in a mirror, you are basically focused on you. And that is not what you want with communication. You should not be focused on you, you should be focused on the other people. So that's why I suggest warming up by going on a walk, getting out and about and running through in your mind what you're going to be communicating or presenting.

You want to have a flexible game plan. If you've got a speech, you don't want to read the speech to the audience, you don't want to memorize your presentation, you don't want to memorize the sales call, or what you plan to say in the meeting or to your colleague, because what that does then is that it makes it very hard for you to actually connect with the people. So just like a sports team, you want a flexible game plan.

KL (37:24): One of the things you talk about is fundamentally connecting with people, and I liked this line you had: “Keep their favorable attention.” And I was like, I've never heard anything framed that way. I've heard keep their attention, how to get their attention, what to do the attention, keep it short, whatever. Keep their favorable attention. It sounds simple. What are you trying to highlight inside of that?

GA: By favorable, it doesn't necessarily mean they agree with you, I don't mean that. I mean that it's *good* attention. Someone can act like they're paying attention to you, when in fact, their mind is wandering off in 100 different places, or they're being easily distracted. So are you doing something as you communicate that has grabbed their interest, that they are *favorably* paying attention to you, that they're hearing what you're saying, that they're developing an opinion about it, that they're willing to respond to it? Anyone can hear the words, the words are coming out of one guy's mouth, going into somebody else's ears, but how are they responding to that?

KL: This is something like active listening, this idea that there's an engagement in their attention in that sense. OK.

GA (38:41): You get about one minute to create a favorable impression. So how do you do that? You begin by asking opening questions: *Did you know?* Did you know that productivity of our department can go up by 50% if we implement this change? *Imagine.* Imagine what our sales force could do if we give them real-time data that they can use on their tablets as they're out there making sales calls in the field. Show people something and then ask for their response.

Another question that people always ask at any communication event is, “How long it's this going to take?” Because if you don't know how long the other person wants you to give them your favorable attention, you tune out. You're not paying attention. And so people want to know: How long is this communication going to take? If it's a presentation, if it's a speech, tell them how long it's going to take. If it's a meeting, how long is it going to take?

KL (39:52): You highlighted something called the elephant in the room, and I thought of all the things to mention, it was an interesting one for me to have seen, but... Do you remember what the elephant in the room was?

GA: Yes. How long the communication is...

KL: I thought that was interesting that you posit that we're automatically thinking about that because... it feels like it's a commitment, doesn't it?

GA: Yes. I mean, even if you're at the most casual thing, say you're just passing your colleague in the hallway at work and "Hey, Hey, Kendall, can I talk to you for a minute?" And you're busy, you were on your way to doing something else, and now I've just called you over to talk. And the first thing in your mind is, "How long does Glen want to talk to me? How much time is he going to use here?" And so that's what you're thinking about. You're not really focused on what it is I'm really trying to communicate. I mean, that's a perfect example of the *illusion* that communication is taking place. So I can get over that by saying to you, "I've got two things I want to share with you here, Kendall, it'll take two minutes. Do you have two minutes?"

KL: Project managers, listen, listen, listen, listen. We're saying that even in short conversations, scope it. And communicate to your stakeholder. "This will be about two minutes worth of content, we need five minutes to discuss it." So I've just given you scope, here are the two topics, so I've given you scope and time. I'm talking to me and you, we're the only two people in the conversation, now we've got it resourced already. Look at that. Project planning in the instant.

GA: There you go. And I just think that that applies, whether it's a casual conversation in the hall, or even if you're getting up to give a presentation in a meeting. You know, you've been called on to do the project review, and you get up in front of the room, in the conference room, and you say, "This is going to take 15 minutes for me to take you through this project update." And so now everybody's got it in their head, "Okay, he's asking for my attention for 15 minutes."

GA (41:50): And then there's two more things that can get in the way of successful communication, and one of these is jargon. Do you use jargon when you communicate, when you talk? Now, jargon has its place. It has a specific meaning, usually. It's useful, it creates for efficient communication and conversation if people understand the jargon. But if they don't... I often think when I hear a speaker just spouting jargon, lots and lots of jargon, it makes the speaker feel good. They're kind of showing off, how smart they are. But if the audience doesn't understand that jargon, it is burying the very thing that you want that other person to understand.

The curse of knowledge is when you can't imagine what it's like to not have the knowledge that you have. So you're looking at this other person, you're looking at this audience of people, and you can't imagine that they don't know what you know.

KL (42:52): Curse of Knowledge. PMs, you know things other people don't... Beware when you talk that way...it's going to happen. To me, that's where the illusion is most likely to happen.

GA: Ah yes.

GA (43:13): You want whatever you say to be repeatable. If people cannot repeat what you are

giving them, then they didn't get it. And so you really need to condense your call to action. If you have a call to action, if you have something that you want people to do when you're done with your communication, you need to condense it down. The chart says eight words or less, or one sentence. But you really want to make sure you condense it, because true communication is not what you say. It is what the receiver takes away.

GA (43:55): And then the second step is to gift them with your favorable attention, to have more meaningful conversations with other people. One of the questions in the social scene, at a reception or a conference, is people ask all the time, “What do you do?” And what do people want when they're asking that kind of question to kick off a conversation? Well, usually they're trying to find out if the two of you have something in common, so that they have a hook on which you can kind of paint a mutually interesting conversation.

So I would suggest to you that if you're trying to have meaningful conversations with people, especially people that you're meeting for the first time, you need to have a good answer to the question, “What do you do?” And if you don't have a good answer, then you are losing an opportunity for a good meaningful conversation.

When I worked at IBM, I was a subject matter expert on large IBM mainframes servers. And the answer to the question was, “I teach mainframe z/OS system programmers how to use the parameters of the workload manager to improve the performance of their mainframe.” That shuts down the conversation really fast. And so what I had to do is think about, “How can I come up with an answer to this question, that is accurate and honest, but is something that a non-computer person could understand?” “Hey, when you're using the banking app on your mobile phone, you're connected to a mainframe. When you're using the ATM to get cash, you're connected to the mainframe. I work on that.” See, I'd think of something that is helpful, that gets that common link going for a meaningful conversation.

KL (45:57): You talked about the “What do you do?” conversation. How to answer that. Well, what do you do? I was just imagining the barbecue or the cocktail party... It seems to me, I'm wondering in what ways PMs have trouble explaining this and how would you take your hints on how to handle that to the project manager?

GA: I guess my main point is to think about it and have rehearsed in your mind what a good answer is. And you might have two answers. You might have one answer, if you're talking to other PMs who all are kind of hanging in the same space; a different answer if you're at the neighborhood barbecue. You might have actually thought about two different answers. But my major emphasis in that section of the presentation is to have thought about it, because most people have not thought about it, and then they're just kind of hemming and hawing around, especially if they're trying to explain it to someone that doesn't understand the world of project management, for example.

GA (47:03): And then turn back more conversations than you take back. Every time somebody finishes talking, you have a choice. You can either turn the conversation back to them or take the conversation yourself. Turn it back to create a meaningful conversation. I'm challenging you here today to choose to be someone who creates and convenes intriguing, interesting conversations. Have more meaningful conversations. It's about sharing control versus taking control.

Steven Spielberg, the famous movie director, he said, “When I was a kid, there was no

collaboration. It's you with the camera bossing your friends around. But as an adult, filmmaking is all about appreciating the talents of the people around you, and knowing you could never have made these films by yourself." It's about sharing, control, not taking control.

KL (48:14): "Turn back more conversations than you take back." I was like, "Hmm. What's going on there?" Tell me what you mean, and tell me why it matters.

GA: It matters because remember, the higher point that I'm talking about in that section is to gift people with your favorable attention. So you've captured and you're holding their attention, but now you're giving them back your attention, which is the part of communication I think most people miss. They only think about, "How do I capture people's attention?"

So if I'm trying to gift you with my favorable attention, I don't want to constantly be taking the conversation back, waiting for you to stop talking, so I can start talking. That's bad listening, too. These do kind of overlap a little, because if all I'm doing is listening to respond, I'm just waiting for you to stop so I can start talking, I'm not really listening to understand you. And so if I am constantly taking back the conversation as opposed to giving it back to you by asking you one of those questions. "Tell me more about what you were just discussing a little bit." "Give me your opinion." You know, maybe you were just at a high level, to give me a little more of your opinion. I'm turning the conversation back to you, and that is a way for me to gift you with my favorable attention

KL: And also in terms of working and leading a team and engaging in a collaborative environment.

GA: Absolutely. The team leader who only wants to maintain control...you know, they're doing a data dump all the time, "Here, let me tell you all the stuff you need to know, team, and now go execute," versus the sharing control idea, which is getting them involved, giving them an opportunity to participate. That's another example of turning back the conversation to your teammates, your team members, rather than simply taking it back all the time.

GA (50:23): For me, I really learned about good communication, about collaboration, because I have spent most of my adult life performing improvisational comedy. I studied and graduated at the Players Workshop of Second City, which is one of the training programs of the famous improv comedy club here in Chicago where I live, called The Second City. You're probably all familiar with the improv comedy. The audience gives the actors suggestions, and then the actors create a show on the fly, improvisationally, using those suggestions.

And there are rules that the actors follow. So at any one point in time, an actor has focus. And then they give that focus to someone else, or someone else takes that focus. Things are initiated in the scene through lines of dialogue or through actions. And so these rules are followed. And the primary rule, the foundation of good improvisational comedy, is thinking and saying, "Yes, and..." "Yes, I hear what you're saying, *and* let me add to it."

And I would suggest to you that in the business world, in the world of project management, if you're trying to create a collaborative environment, if you're trying to communicate by gifting people with your favorable attention, you want to be thinking and saying, "Yes, and..."

It's relating. Relating is when you realize that the other person is a crucial partner. This is about

collaboration, folks. This is about creating a culture of open communication. Saying Yes is an act of courage. Saying Yes builds optimism. Saying Yes allows you to share control that expands your world and it prevents what in the communication game, we call blocking.

Saying No blocks communication. People who say No are people who say “Yes, but...” But is such a nasty word, it shuts down everything, you know, that the people have said previously. Thinking “Yes, and...” doesn't mean that you agree with them. It means that you are caring and accepting what they're saying. So I can think and say, “Yes, and...” with someone who I do not agree with. So what I'm thinking is, “I hear what you're saying, I accept your point of view, and now I'm going to add to that, I'm going to respond to that. You want to say, “Yes, *and* here are the challenges.”

KL (53:23): In general, don't use *but*, use *and*. And it's the weirdest thing. When you start rephrasing things as *and*, it almost forces you to think less antagonistically. You are kind of required to think about following your own thought. Opening the door for someone to engage with you on that second part of the sentence, what was going to come after the *but*. But now it forces you to almost be more positive. That's one.

The second one was, we have a very negative response to, someone has just set me up for something and is taking it away. They're setting me up for... you know, I agree with you, but you haven't considered this... Like I'm already being challenged. And we can't help but feel challenged when that happens. And there's no reason for it. So I've gone through documents that I've written or even emails, and I just kind of go through and take out my *buts* and re-write them as *and* statements, and it makes them nicer!

GA: It takes a lot of thought and concentration to do that, we are so used to saying *but*. I mean you just say it in normal, like you said, in normal English conversation. So it takes a lot of work to really think about not saying that.

KL (54:42): How does it vary for you in a virtual environment?

GA: So you think about the challenge of trying to have effective communication in remote meetings. You know, zoom fatigue that everybody is experiencing these days. And so a couple of things come to mind. One of them is that it's so easy to be distracted if you're in a Zoom meeting. I think about it, you know. People are home, they're sitting in their kitchen, and their dog's running around, their kids are running around. They're looking out the window. There are all these distractions.

And so if you are the one...

KL: Oh I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said, I wasn't paying attention. I'm sorry. [Laughter]

KL: This is being recorded on a virtual conference...

GA: Yes, yes I'm watching Kendall as his eyes drift to looking out the window...

So keeping that in mind as a communicator, talking less, keeping it succinct, so you don't lose people's attention as their mind drifts away, having patience with people in online meetings, especially if you're having a meeting with people that maybe you don't know all that well. You can't

see their body language, perhaps or you can barely see it. You can't really tell if they are giving you their favorable attention or not. And so having patience with them...

And I think that remote meetings is the perfect place to practice, “Yes, and...” And so you kind of summarize what they said to make sure that communication did take place there. “Yes, let me repeat what you have said, *and* now let me move into my opinion respectfully.” And so I just think that these challenges need to be considered, especially if you're the communicator or the organizer of a remote meeting.

GA (56:365): No matter what business you are in, you are in the relationship business and the people business. And that applies to this whole discussion of good communication skill, right? Everyone needs to realize they're in the people and relationship business, no matter what business they're really in.

KL: There's a lot to learn in this, you cover a lot of different pieces. But what's something that would be challenging for people to hear, out of what you were trying to present here?

GA: I always come back to the listening. Listening is just so important. To be a good listener. And we've already kind of covered this, but I just think it's a top thing, is the listening to truly understand versus people who simply listen to respond.

KL (57:28): So it turns out that the most important aspect of communication is *listening*. Listen well. Don't judge. Never respond with “Yes, *but*...” That's essentially a rebuttal. Train yourself to say “Yes, *and*...” Of course, avoid jargon and make yourself clear to those who may not have the same depth of knowledge that you have on the subject. Make sure your message is repeatable.

Communication is a collaborative affair and sharing control is the best way to have an effective exchange. And as a hiker, I liked his opening, for preparation to create that first impression: warm up with a walk!

Life depends on communication. It's ingrained in our personality, and it gets us through our daily transactions. Yet it's stunning how often our messaging is skewed, not received as intended, misinterpreted or rejected. But if we apply ourselves to the methods and practices we discussed here, we can improve. It's all about giving and taking, and it's better that you give more than you take. Empathize with the deliverer or the receiver of your message. That will go a long way towards ensuring that communication is actually happening. It takes effort, it takes practice, so work on it. Pay attention. With truly effective communication, you can build the top level team and the organization that you imagine.

Remember to check out the University of Maryland website at <https://pmsymposium.umd.edu/pm2021/>

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Special thanks to my guests, Richard Wyatt and Glenn Anderson.

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