The importance of targeted communication in SFIA implementations

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People. They are an organisation's greatest asset. However it's that most important asset that can make or break the success of any project. Fear of the unknown, or fear of change can upset the balance of any project being undertaken.

SFIA, the Skills Framework for the Information Age is a "people" framework. It focuses on the skills and the capabilities required in supporting good governance.

This paper outlines the 'people' skills required by Project Managers as opposed to the more technical, or tangible skills, plus discusses 3 key areas that must be considered in any project, but particularly for SFIA implementations when the focus is on assessment of individual skills.

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Managing the beast of change

At the start of every engagement we talk to our clients about the importance of communication and effectively managing that scary beast: Change. We've seen a number of clients implement SFIA, and it's interesting to note the different approaches they have to communicating their message. Call it internal marketing, call it communication, call it management of change – effectively what we are talking about is transmitting a (hopefully positive) message out to the people that will be directly or indirectly affected by the project.

Our approach to a SFIA implementation includes a Management of Change component which can be modified to suit any size or type of organisation. Sometimes these components are taken up, sometimes not.

Of course we know that all people are different. And all people learn and process information in different ways. A SFIA implementation (Skills Framework for the Information Age for those that have not heard of the framework) focuses on the skills required for an IT organisation to work efficiently and effectively. Not only that, it assists organisations with role definitions and outlines the skill and the level of skill required for each role. Finally, it analyses the skills currently held by the people in those positions, providing the organisation with a skills matrix that can be used in changing or improving the organisation design, assisting with the formulation of personal development and training plans; essentially, making the most of the most important asset in an organisation – its people.

But with implementations such as these, it's that most important asset that can make or break its success. Fear of the unknown and fear of change can upset the balance of any project being undertaken. So it's vitally important that people are considered at the start, middle and end of any such project, and that they are considered as individuals, each with different objectives, goals and ways of processing information.

SFIA is a "people" framework. It focuses on the skills and the capabilities required in supporting good governance, and it is the missing link in governance adoption. More importantly for individuals, it provides a framework for understanding the skills each person has, and helps generate a roadmap for training and personal development.

Getting ready

Before we think about the communication methods and techniques that should be considered as part of a SFIA implementation, it is worth exploring the responsibilities and skill levels of the people responsible for the success of a project – in most cases, the Project Manager. The skill sets required for a Project Manager can be defined as the following:

- PRMG: Project Management
- CIPM: Change Implementation Planning and Management
- BENM: Benefits Management
- RLMT: Relationship Management
- BURM: Business Risk Management
- CNSL: Consultancy

Further information on these skills and why they are applicable to a Project Manager can be found in the White Paper "Why is a good Project Manager so hard to find", available on the BSMimpact website.

Additionally, the Prince2 themes of 'plan' and 'change' are directly aligned to CIPM, and 'risk' is related to BURM. Plan describes the steps required to develop the plans and associated techniques required to deliver the work products, whilst Change addresses how project managers assess and act upon issues which have a potential impact on the baseline aspects of the project.

And finally, the Risk theme addresses how project management manages the uncertainties associated with the project delivery and creates strategies to mitigate those risks.

To ensure the success of any project, the Project Manager needs to have these skills to be able to effectively plan the project, manage change, and manage risk. In the case of a SFIA project, where the focus is on people, Project Managers need to consider more "intangible" aspects of the skills outlined above. For example:

- BENM (Benefits Management): benefits need to focus on more than the dollar savings, but the benefits to individuals – the What's in it for me?
- RLMT (Relationship Management): the Project Manager needs to consider other stakeholders, such as Human Resource Managers, Workforce Planners, and Recruiters, and ensure appropriate stakeholder mapping.
- BURM (Business Risk Management): Take into account risks to rejection. People may feel threatened by the focus on individual skills and therefore strategies must take into account individual (or personal) reactions to the project.
- CIPM (Change Implementation Planning and Management): Project Managers need to ensure that project plans incorporate targeted communication strategies to ensure a successful outcome, particularly as it directly involves staff providing information on their personal skill sets, qualifications and experience.

It is these intangible, or "people" aspects to the skills of a Project Manager that are most important in the case of a SFIA implementation. Project Managers must ensure their plans take these elements into account, and it is through communication that many of them can be addressed.

To further ensure the success of a SFIA implementation, there are three key areas that must be considered by the Project Manager as part of the communication strategy. They include the following:

1. Know your audience.
2. Consider your message approach.
3. Select different methods to broadcast your message.

We'll take each of these areas and explore them in a little more detail.

Know your audience

It's more often that we see targeting or segmenting of customers rather than internal staff. This can be achieved in a number of ways dependent on the project; by department, by job title, by geographical location. In the case of a recent SFIA implementation, it would have benefitted from segmenting by job title, but this may not always be the case.

A recent service we delivered focussed on all staff within IT. This meant that Executive Assistants and administrative staff who did not feel they were "IT staff" per se, were also being asked to complete a SFIA Self-Assessment.

This led to these staff feeling anxious about their job role and why they were completingt he assessment because, according for them, they "didn't have any IT skills".

We encouraged these people to finish the self-assessment and complete a face to face interview. And it was amazing to see how these people came out of their interview feeling positive and excited when they realised in fact they did have a number of skills. One in particular concluded a face-to-face meeting with 6 skills when they thought they had none! They included Service Level Management (SLMO), Asset Management (ASMG), Configuration Management (CFMG), Service Desk and Incident Management (USUP), Supplier Relationship Management (SURE), and Client Services Management (CSMG).

This example also highlights the importance of multiple contact points; a self-assessment is one person's perception of their own skills as they see them, but an independent assessor is likely to extract a lot more information out of a person and work through their skill levels with more ease than an individual looking at their own skills.

Consider your message 'approach'

More often than not, change is perceived as something negative. At the outset, consider whether you need a number of approaches, or a singular approach. This will need to take into account the type of project being embarked on, the target audience and also the amount of time there is to complete the task.

In her book, "The People Manager's Toolkit", Karen Gately outlines that "*Communication is an important enabler of all successful relationships and teams*". She also explains that no matter how well you communicate, there are likely to be those in your team who want more information, or an opportunity to voice their opinions or ideas. The approach you choose should be planned and targeted to ensure that you are reaching the majority of people, and that you give each member of the team time to understand, digest and provide feedback.

A typical communication approach that we've all seen can be described as coercive in nature. This can best be described using an example of an email from "the boss", that effectively says "do this task, and do it now (please!)". This may work well in some situations, but in SFIA implementations where you are talking to staff about their roles, their skills – their livelihoods – such an approach is not ideal.

Many also consider a directive approach, where staff are informed about the impending implementation and told why the implementation is important to the organisation. This approach also misses the boat when we're talking about people and skills. People want to know what's in it for them, and want to understand the reasons for the change as they apply to them, not just the company. A directive approach is useful to employ when there are specific tasks to be done during the course of the implementation and when there is a short time frame involved.

Our preference is for a collaborative approach. This approach uses workshops and meetings to keep staff up to date on activities relating to the project. At each stage, staff members are invited to provide input and in return, feedback is provided to demonstrate that their input has been, or will be, acted upon.

Karen also discusses the importance of "*earning buy-in*" and to consult with staff to draw on their ideas and insights. "*Communication is a non-negotiable priority for every people manager*." In situations such as SFIA implementations, where the services being delivered mean each person has a role to play and that role is talking about their own skills, qualifications and experience, the collaborative approach is essential. This does, however, require that more time is needed to coordinate staff, to provide time for them to digest the information and offer their views.

Such an approach needs to consider the audience and to create different workshops and meetings dependent on the audience in the room. It's also important that we select different communication methods to support the workshops and meetings... which leads us to our final tip.

Select different communication methods to broadcast your message

How do you best digest information?

Collaborative approaches consider different ways of talking to people. Some people respond really well to written pages; others like video; and some others will prefer a workshop. Whilst you won't get it right for everyone, considering different mediums will ensure your message gets across to a greater percentage of your target audience.

As a collaborative approach aims to collect feedback and ideas as well as disseminating information, choosing a single communication method such as email is not ideal. Whilst electronic forms of communication such as email or an intranet bulletin board has its place, being able to receive feedback face-to-face, and observe body language will be much more beneficial in potentially dealing with any negative situations as they arise.   Face to face also provides the opportunity to listen; a very wise person once said to me that "you have two ears and one mouth for a reason: listen twice as much as you speak". Giving staff permission to provide feedback and voice any potential concerns from the outset gives you the opportunity to fix any issues and negate these concerns rather than letting them spiral out of the control and impact others.

A great article written by Eve Ash on website http://www.smartcompany.com.au states that demotivated team members have usually lost the urge to care about the company's overall position, and wonder 'what's in it for me?' Ash states that "*by reinforcing the bigger picture, you offer a point of context for where the team member's contribution fits in*".

A SFIA implementation considers a number of different mediums. We offer the following:

- Email templates that demonstrate the "What's in it for me"
- Presentations for use in a workshop
- A 10-minute animated video presentation that can be customised
- Frequently Asked Questions – in a brochure or online
- Ideas for posters / signage for placing around the offer
- Training (accredited and customised)

Each of these communication methods need to be tailored to consider the audience, and also consider the benefits of a SFIA implementation - to the organisation AND to the individual. Going back to Eve Ash's comments, this takes into account the bigger picture and shows the individual why it's important for them as well.

"*The feeling of no control is really disempowering to people. By continually highlighting where people can have control and influence the outcomes of their working life, you give them confidence and a clear path to action. That is a very powerful, motivating thing to do for those around you. Those that are really disenfranchised will resist and argue against ideas you present for them to take control, such is their learned helplessness, but keep at it and you will have a motivated colleague and a more productive team*."

Conclusion

SFIA implementations are sometimes met with a lot of resistance because it is seen to be a way to "rate" individuals, and assess their performance. Quite often it is usually the opposite: organisations want to understand what skills they already have in place, and determine what skills might need developing.

This ultimately saves time and money in recruiting new staff, provides a positive message to current staff that they are valued, and if they do need to recruit, organisations know exactly what skills they need to complement the team they already have. If we can transmit this message to individuals from the outset, perhaps there would be less resistance to change and they might actually get something out of the exercise.

So if you are looking to implement SFIA in your organisation, first consider what the benefits are to both the organisation AND the individual, then prepare a number of different messages and use different methods to transmit the message.

You'll reap the rewards at the end of the exercise if staff can easily see the benefits of the implementation from the outset.

References

Karen Gately, 'The People Manager's Tool Kit: A practical guide to getting the best from people' 2013.
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About the author

Nicole is a creative, strategic and highly experienced marketing professional with over 15 years' experience in the Information Technology products and services, and training and development, sectors.

She has an exceptional work ethic and commitment to organisational objectives within a highly competitive and rapidly changing market place.

A proactive manager, team builder and tactical planner, Nicole has the ability to build strong and lasting relationships.

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