

## Communication through Crisis: Keeping Project Management Effective in the Wake of COVID-19

*In today's post, [Ken Schlechter](#), change and compliance management expert and owner of [Kenneth Michael Consulting Services, LLC](#), shares insights from more than three decades of experience with companies like Morgan Stanley, The Blackstone Group, and Credit Suisse. The advice provided in this key Insight can apply both to enterprise organizations now navigating a 100 percent remote workforce, and also to independent consultants looking to maximize value while facilitating projects with now dispersed resources.*

The evolution of managing projects is taking a turn during this COVID-19 crisis. Instead of holding a conference call for a few locations where groups of people are in the same room, we are now facilitating sessions where everyone is in a separate location. Think about that for minute. You are facilitating a meeting with ten people and no one is in the same room. Can we be successful in this new environment? The answer is yes, assuming we manage and respond to three key challenges.

**#1: How do we ensure that everyone is engaged and effectively communicating?** If you are in a conference room with other people, you are not looking at your phone or reading emails during the meeting. When facilitating a remote call how many times do you hear: "Can you please repeat that question?" Did they really not hear it or did they lose focus and are trying to climb back into the conversation?

**#2: Ensuring accountability.** With everyone working in their own space do people have the discipline to stay on top of their work and ensure they are hitting their project milestones? Is it not easier to walk over to someone to ask how things are going or to lend support?

**#3: How can we ensure Senior Management remains engaged?** Will they continue to fund the project and provide their time?

We are past the point where asking the question if this new way to managing projects is better or worse. It is just different, and project managers and workers alike need to adapt.

### **Communication and Accountability Means Even More When Working Remotely**

When facilitating a remote meeting, the PM should start by getting commitments from all participants that they will refrain from answering emails, texting and surfing the web and to focus on the meeting. In turn, the PM needs to understand that the attention span of remote meetings is less than in-person meetings. They need to make sure the objectives are clear, the meeting is run efficiently. The length of the meeting is dictated by the subject matter.

It is also imperative to ensure that the lines of communication are not just open but are two-way. Many times a PM sends out meeting minutes, RAID logs, status updates and upcoming deliverables, and while they are clear and concise, there is always the question if they are truly being read.

It becomes critical to change the purpose of the email/update to focus on clear messaging on what needs to be done as well as receive a positive confirmation from each of the recipients. This will assist the PM in keeping everyone accountable for his or her respective work and obligations to the project. You can never have too much transparency. People might tell you they were already told but I see this as a good problem to have.

### **Don't be Afraid to Ask for Help**

Many people still believe that asking for assistance is a sign of weakness. They can't handle the workload, they won't get promoted or get a raise, their jobs are in jeopardy. While a good organization should already have a culture that puts their employees at ease around asking for assistance the fear still exists. It is especially important that both the PM and project team on remote projects not only ask for help, when needed, but to do so in a timely manner.

When managing projects I tell my teams not to wait till Thursday night for help on something due on Friday. They need to ask for help when they first start to feel they may be late. When everyone is remote this can easily slip. It is important for the PM to have a pulse on how the work is going and to be able to start to think about contingency plans if necessary. This also allows the PM to manage the expectations of the Senior Stakeholders in case this is impacting the overall project deliverable.

### **Re-confirm Governance Structure**

If you think it is difficult to get a quorum of senior leaders for a Steering Committee meeting when everyone is in the office, try to do this when everyone is remote. Senior Executives are now dealing with a new array of issues given the environment and getting them to focus on projects is more difficult than ever.

All PMs need to review their governance structures to ensure that the project is still a priority, being funded and has dedicated resources. Once this is confirmed, the PM needs to re-evaluate the members of the Key Senior Stakeholder group and reach out to each of them to ensure that they will have time to periodically meet and to provide assistance and decision making when required. A project without senior leadership support will always struggle.

### **Conclusion**

While there are other factors to consider when managing remote projects I see these as three critical considerations that need to be addressed in this new environment.

We are in the midst of an evolutionary change in the industry and no one really knows what the landscape will look like after we get passed this current crisis. I do not see organizations going completely back to where they were. I see companies finding a common ground where there will be more people working remote than before COVID-19 roared into our lives. The key for good PMs is to remain being the chameleon and continue to adjust to not only the personalities and capabilities of your project teams but the organizational landscape as well.



View [Ken's website](#) and find him on [LinkedIn](#).

## About the author

Ken Schlechter is an accomplished leader with extensive financial services experience and expertise in helping large financial organizations like **Morgan Stanley**, **The Blackstone Group**, and **Credit Suisse** become more efficient, scalable, and compliant.

Over 25 years managing multi-million dollar global projects that include: financial transformations, organizational changes, system implementations, FATCA, CCAR and various new regulations.

In his career, he has proven success to influence without authority, facilitate change, and consistently meet deadlines through positive consensus-building across complex organizations.

With a passion for treating colleagues and clients with respect that drives results, Ken is a natural motivator and team builder. That same passion has led him to teach Ethics and Organizational Behavior as an **Adjunct MBA Professor** at NYU and **The University of Dayton**.



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