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Communicating a Change in Your Project's Go-Live Date

Your project go-live date has changed – now what? Regardless of the reasons for the change (and let's face it, "the date has changed" usually is interpreted as "the date has slipped"), there are six steps you should take when communicating a change in your project's go-live date:

1. Consider the context.

It's important to consider the context in which the change is occurring. If it is early in the project lifecycle, the change may not be critical because there is enough time to adjust the project plan. However, it may undermine people's confidence in the project planning process. On the other hand, if the project is already well underway, you will need to be clear how the new date impacts the delivery of the components and benefits that were promised in the project initiation stage.

2. Consider the audience.

As with any communication, first you have to consider your audience. Who will be on the receiving end of this communication? In most cases, you will have several groups, including the project stakeholders, the project team members and others impacted by the project. Each group has its own needs and you have to consider how the change affects each group.

3. Create the message.

It is crucial to be clear and consistent about the message you are communicating. What is the reason for the change? Will the later date help make the project more successful by giving more time for requirements gathering or customization or training? Or is the change related to budget or resource availability?

Be careful with having an "official" message that is different from the "real" reason for the change. Very often the real reason will trickle out into the organization anyway and undercut the environment of trust that you are trying to create. Honesty – especially upfront rather than after the truth is discovered - is the best policy.

The message should be clear and concise – no more than a few sentences. And it should be tailored to each audience: "here is the reason for the change and here is how it impacts you."



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4. Choose a spokesperson.

Who communicates the message depends on your project's communication plan and governance structure. It also depends on the audience. For example, if the project sponsor regularly communicates status to the project steering committee or board, and the project manager usually communicates to the rest of the organization, then those individuals should communicate the change to their respective audiences as part of the regular status updates.

If there has been little communication about the project, you can make this communication the first in a series of regular project updates. The project sponsor could introduce the first update and then the project manager or other designated person could continue with the following updates.

5. Consider how the message will be communicated.

There are many ways that you can communicate the change, from a special all-company meeting to a line in your monthly project status report. You should follow the process that you have outlined in your project's communication plan and also consider that *how* you communicate the message is just as important, if not more so, than *what* you communicate.

For example, if you hold a special all-company meeting to announce the change in date, people will get the sense that the change is a big deal. On the other hand, if you just slip it into the last line of a project update that gets posted on a rarely-visited website, people may either not see it or think you are trying to hide it.

If the message is communicated in person, be aware of the speaker's non-verbal communications, such as eye contact, facial expression and tone of voice. These non-verbal elements should convey sincerity, confidence and empathy: "I'm telling the truth, I know what I'm talking about and I care how it affects you." Also decide in advance how questions will be handled and by whom.

6. Follow-up after the communication.

It's important that there be frequent follow-up after the communication to ensure that people received the message and to respond to any questions or concerns. This feedback will help you determine what/how to communicate next. Informal channels of communication are valuable here because people may be more open about their perceptions of the project when they're standing around the water cooler or in the parking lot than when they're in formal project status meetings.

Project changes happen. Communicating a change in the project's go-live date does not have to derail your project. It can be an opportunity to revisit (or create) your project's communication, risk management and change management plans. Having these plans in place will help ensure that the changes do not disrupt the project or hinder its ultimate success.