

Why Conversations Are The Superior Form Of Communication

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By [Clinton M. Padgett](#), Forbes Books Author.
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Understanding the difference between “communication” and “conversation” can determine whether a project stays on track or veers off course.

In project management, “communication” and “conversation” are often used interchangeably. But they aren’t the same, and understanding the difference can determine whether a project stays on track or veers off course.

Conversations: Synchronous Communication Explained

Conversations are *a* form of synchronous communication—real-time exchanges, such as in-person meetings, phone calls, or video conferences. They allow for instant clarification, course correction, and nuance: “Did you mean two weeks or two months?” That immediate feedback reduces misunderstandings and mistakes.

By contrast, communication can also be *asynchronous*. Think email, collaborative software, instant messaging, or texts. Asynchronous tools are valuable, but because they lack real-time interaction, they’re more prone to delays, misinterpretation, and costly rework.

The Risks of Over-Reliance on Asynchronous Tools

We always have more on our to-do lists than we can possibly accomplish. And as human beings, we have this innate desire to check things off that list. Consequently, project teams often default to email or messaging to check off tasks quickly. But sending an “I’m done” email doesn’t confirm whether expectations were actually met. When gaps surface later, delaying a teammate’s work or requiring rework, the cost can be far greater than taking two minutes to pick up the phone.

Why Conversations Drive Better Outcomes

Research on [synchronous vs. asynchronous learning](#) found that real-time interactions better support competence, connection, and natural language flow.

The same applies to projects: conversations transform colleagues from email addresses into collaborators. Nonverbal cues, tone, and immediacy strengthen trust, rapport, and understanding.

Conversations are particularly critical for complex, inter-dependent work, learning, motivation, and relationship-building. In project management, this is crucial in:

- Establishing project charters and requirements
- Debriefs and lessons learned
- Sharing sensitive information
- Team building, brainstorming, and trust-building

Avoiding the “Telephone Game”

Anyone who’s played the childhood game of Telephone knows that the “secret” changes as it’s whispered from child to child. Seeing how much it’s changed is what makes the game fun.

The Telephone game is played in the business world every day when information flows without clarification, but now it’s no longer amusing. When I receive a message, it’s filtered through my life experiences, biases, and assumptions, as well as how I define certain words. I then pass my interpretation of the message to the next person, who repeats the process. It’s no wonder the message is mangled!

We can avoid the message-mangling by simply having a conversation. A synchronous dialogue enables us to ask clarifying questions in real-time, allowing us to understand the message as intended.

Put that in Writing, Please

Keep in mind that any important or complex conversations should always be documented, vetted by the project manager, and shared across the team.

Breaking Down Silos Through Conversation

People naturally gravitate toward those who share their background—whether by discipline, culture, or work style. But projects succeed when diverse perspectives come together. Conversations help coax us out of our silos, validate our worth and contributions as teammates, and prevent mistakes that cost time and money.

The Bottom Line

All conversations are forms of communication, but not all communication is a conversation. In project management, conversations offer clarity, connection, and accountability that asynchronous tools can't match. Used wisely, they are one of the most powerful ways to boost team performance and project success.

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