

# Reversed communication

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*3 May 2013*

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You only have to open a newspaper and a communication blunder pops up. Dutch examples are the earthquakes in Groningen beginning of this year or the fuss about whether or not accidentally two stray republicans were arrested on 30 April (our last Queens day). It is clear that communication is difficult.

Also within asset management we have to deal with communication. This is also recognised by the standard in this area, PAS55, which requires that the relevant asset management information should clearly be communicated with employees and other stakeholders. In this case communication is bi-directional. If applicable, stakeholders must be consulted in defining the asset management strategy, policy and plans. But also functional and engineering standards, processes and procedures are mentioned in the standard. In the new ISO55001 standard also communication requirements are included. It should be formalised what is communicated, when, with whom and how. What is striking about these requirements, is that this is on the content of the communication. The information that is shared with stakeholders can have influence on the content of the documents, which the asset manager sets up. Contractors are also part of the mentioned stakeholders. In the order for the contractor it should be clear what is expected and in the preparation of the plans the knowledge about the feasibility is very valuable. The problems which can arise when these substantive communication is not well organised, almost speak for themselves. If you order to build a bridge but you do not tell where it should be located, chances are that it is built across the wrong river. Further analysis often shows that somewhere in the chain information is “thrown over the wall”, without a check what the recipient has received and what this recipient will do with it.

But there is also another kind of communication problem that is not just about the content (which strangely enough is well received) but on the form, precise formulation, presumed intention, posture and so on. Just think of the resistance that can occur when a manager of a classic operations and maintenance department wants to turn it into an asset management department. There is always someone who asks whether the current situation is not good. The answer is often somewhat elusive. It is then argued that the current situation is okay but there are many opportunities for improvement. This all in accordance with the recommendation of the communication advisor. But a good listener of course understands what is actually being said, namely that it is not good (enough) now. This listener can so easily feel being attacked and feel afraid for his job, while the intention of the manager was to make people enthusiastic about asset management. The communication problem is born.

There are two ways to look at such problems. The first is that the communication problem is caused by the messenger. The premise is that if the message is not understood, it is not communicated well. As a result the messenger can be sent to a communication training. At the risk of destroying the complete communication training business, we summarise the main lessons here: be sincere, start a bad news conversation with the bad news and only tell things that you know for sure. And if you do not know something, say it too (or shut up) and please do not speculate. As simple as it sounds, this works, except of course if you are president of the Eurogroup<sup>1</sup>.

The second way to look at the communication problem is that the message just is not good. This means that the intention, form and content do not match (not that the message is incorrect or objectionable). To make someone excited with bad news will not easily succeed, just like firing people after an impassioned speech about the future of the organisation will be received badly. Yet you see in practice people are often trampled in the second trap, where all kinds of communication are used to get the desired outcome. But the message is internally contradictory: on one hand, you show that you do not find the other party important by doing nothing with the input from that other party. On the other hand, you would like to get approval of the other party because that's how it should be done according to the

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<sup>1</sup> “In Brussel moet je niet altijd eerlijk zijn”, NRC Handelsblad, 26 maart 2013 (in Dutch)

communication plans. Take for example the consultation evenings for the zoning in the Netherlands: in how many cases is really something done with the objections?

A company that came into heavy-handed contact with it for quite some time ago was Shell. In communication with stakeholders normally the "DAD" principle was used, representing Decide, Announce and Defend the decision. It does not excel in taking stakeholders seriously, but overall it worked pretty well: they managed to do what they wanted. At least, until the Brent Spar (source figure: Wikimedia commons). To get recalled the Brent Spar was an oil storage platform that was taken out of service in June 1995. Based on an extensive study it was determined that sinking it in the deep sea would be the best solution. Greenpeace did not agree, occupied the platform and published incorrect information about the amount of harmful substances in the platform. Now this happened quite often and the standard reaction of Shell was to show that Greenpeace spread false information. In this case, however, Greenpeace had support from the public and Shell was not believed at all. There was a spontaneous worldwide boycott of Shell petrol stations plus some violent actions. This made Shell's decision untenable and Shell changed the decision. And even the communication strategy was adapted to the principle of DDD (Dialogue, Decide and Deliver). This means that first consultation is conducted, the results of these consultations are included in the considerations of the decision and that this decision is then executed<sup>2</sup>. Deciding and communicating are therefore reversed.



Here a clear similarity is visible with the asset management process we have already discussed in a previous column. We have seen that a reversal of the first two process steps makes a major difference and that is also applicable in communication<sup>3</sup>. The principles DAD and DDD can both be an interpretation of the requirements of PAS55 and ISO55001 regarding to communication, but the effect is also very different here. By putting your problem clearly on the table and ask stakeholders to think about a solution instead of defending a taken decision, you eventually reach a universally acceptable solution<sup>4</sup>. But you have to mean it. To enter such a communication path with no intention to listen to others will come back like a boomerang.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information see for example [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brent\\_Spar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brent_Spar) or <http://www-static.shell.com/content/dam/shell/static/gbr/downloads/e-and-p/brent-spar-dossier.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Column "Asset management: Philosophy or instrument?"

<sup>4</sup> See for an analogy the Harvard Method, as described in Getting to Yes, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Getting\\_to\\_YES](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Getting_to_YES)