

Communicating Problems to Stakeholders

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Project Managers often have to communicate **'difficult'** messages to their project stakeholders. These messages generally come from expectations of not meeting the schedule, not achieving the budget, not incorporating specific functions and not meeting quality measures.

Most Project Managers lack strategies to communicate these difficult messages. The first step is to separate risks from issues. **Risks** are potential problems that haven't happened yet; **issues** are problems that are currently happening on the project. The point is to avoid focusing on problems that are not yet happening; this often becomes counter-productive with stakeholders.

Spend your time communicating with stakeholders about the **critical few problems** that must be resolved to keep the project on track. Avoid overwhelming stakeholders with a laundry list of every item on the issues list.

On the next page you will find a process to identify and present these top problems.

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Follow these steps:

1. Separate out risk items (potential problems) and create a risk register. Develop strategies to avoid these risks, make this risk register available to the project team and update it if something important changes.
2. Develop an issues list (problems currently happening). On any given project there are many issues at all times. Some issues turn into specific tasks on the project plan; others are worked on in regularly scheduled project meetings.
3. Identify the few top problems and use the following format to communicate them:
 - a. Describe **what is happening**
 - b. Describe **the impact** – if you can't articulate an important impact, then maybe the problem is not critical
 - c. Describe what you are **doing to resolve** the issues and by when – this helps to focus the stakeholder on helping you with your plan

This approach puts the responsibility on the project manager to think through the impact of the problem before raising it with stakeholders. Too often, project managers run into negative reactions from stakeholders who perceive that the PM is not willing to solve the problem or the project is not under control.