Soft Skills as Risk Management in Utility Coordination

How communication, collaboration, and professional judgement reduce project risk across the full Utility Coordination lifecycle.

Claire Lukka, P.Eng., ing.

Director of Utility Coordination

4Sight Utility Engineers

Contents

Executive Summary

In utility coordination, technical competence is the baseline. It is necessary, but insufficient. The projects that run on schedule, within budget, and without safety incidents are not distinguished by superior technical knowledge alone. They are distinguished by the quality of communication, collaboration, and professional judgment applied across the full project lifecycle.

This whitepaper examines the role of soft skills as a practical risk management discipline in utility coordination. It argues that communication, active listening, relationship building, conflict resolution, adaptability, and organizational follow-through are not supplementary to the technical work. They are core to managing complexity, competing priorities, and incomplete information that define this field.

Coordinators who develop these skills systematically surface issues earlier, align stakeholders more effectively, and deliver measurably better outcomes on complex, multi-stakeholder projects.

> *The projects that go sideways rarely trace back to a technical mistake alone. They trace back to a conversation that did not happen, an assumption that was never challenged, or an issue that was flagged too late.*

1. The Nature of Utility Coordination Risk

Utility coordination sits at the intersection of engineering, construction, public infrastructure, and utility operations. It spans the full project lifecycle, from early planning through design, pre-construction, and construction support, and involves stakeholders whose priorities do not naturally align.

Risk in this environment comes from four primary sources:

INCOMPLETE RECORDS	As-built documentation is often inaccurate, outdated, or missing. What is shown on paper does not always reflect what is in the ground.
UNKNOWN FIELD CONDITIONS	Even with thorough records and investigations, surprises occur. Utilities are found where they were not expected. Depths are wrong. Materials differ from documentation.
COMPETING PRIORITIES	Utility owners prioritize service continuity. Designers prioritize constructability. Contractors prioritize schedule and cost. These are all legitimate concerns that don't always align.
LIMITED WINDOWS	Relocation windows, regulatory approvals, and service continuity requirements all create constraints that cannot shift without downstream consequences.

Each of these risk sources is manageable in isolation. The danger arises when they compound: when incomplete records meet a tight schedule and a stakeholder who has not been kept informed. That combination is where delays, change orders, and safety incidents originate.

Recognizing where risk comes from is the foundation for applying soft skills proactively, before problems escalate.

2. Why Technical Expertise Is Not Enough

Technical competence is the foundation of utility coordination. Reading plans, understanding utility systems, interpreting specifications, and applying the right standards are all essential. There is no shortcut around that expertise.

But experienced coordinators know the reality that industry data consistently confirms: most project failures are not caused by technical errors. They are caused by misunderstandings, unstated assumptions, and breakdowns in communication.

> *You can have perfectly accurate drawings and still have conflicts if the expectations around those drawings were never clearly communicated. Technical skills tell you what the problem is. Soft skills are how you get it solved.*

The coordinators who consistently deliver strong outcomes on complex projects are the ones who have developed both capabilities. They understand the technical content deeply and communicate it in a way that drives alignment and action across every stakeholder group.

3. Soft Skills as a Risk Management Tool

Soft skills are not a personality trait that some professionals happen to possess. They are a practical discipline that can be developed, applied deliberately, and used to measurably reduce project risk. Here's how each core skill functions as a risk management mechanism:

Clear Communication

Proactive communication prevents misunderstandings before they become costly surprises. Coordinators who share information early, before problems surface, give stakeholders time to act rather than react. The specific dimensions that matter most are:

- Audience translation: designers, contractors, and utility owners process the same information differently. Effective coordinators frame technical conflicts in terms that are meaningful to whoever needs to act.
- Proactive flagging: sharing potential conflicts and upcoming decisions before they create pressure on the schedule.
- Documentation as communication: meeting minutes, decision logs, conflict matrices, and escalation records are not administrative burdens. They are communication tools that protect the project and everyone on it.

Active Listening

Active listening surfaces constraints that do not appear in drawings or schedules, often before those constraints have had a chance to cause damage. In practice, this means:

- Listening for constraints, not just to answers. Operational requirements, crew availability windows, and regulatory restrictions often come out in conversation if you are paying attention.
- Asking clarifying questions before moving to solutions. Understanding the underlying issue before proposing a resolution.
- Confirming understanding by summarizing back what has been heard. Misalignment caught before a commitment is made is an asset.

Relationship Building

In utility coordination, good relationships are not a nice-to-have benefit. They are a risk mitigation asset. Stakeholders who trust the coordinator share information more openly, flag issues earlier, and engage collaboratively on solutions rather than retreating into defensive positions.

In an industry where coordinators frequently work with the same utility owners, agencies, and contractors across multiple projects over many years, the trust built or eroded on one project carries directly into the next.

Collaboration and Stakeholder Alignment

Coordinators typically have responsibility without formal authority. You cannot order a utility owner to relocate or a contractor to change their sequencing. What you can do is create the conditions for shared problem-solving.

When stakeholders are invited into the process, their constraints are acknowledged, and options are presented rather than directives, they develop a sense of ownership over the solution. When stakeholders are part of the process, solutions are far more likely to be implemented.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict in utility coordination is not a failure. It is a predictable feature of environments where multiple organizations with competing priorities are working toward shared outcomes. The question is not how to avoid it, but how to handle it effectively when it arrives.

The principles that hold up consistently are staying objective and separating the personal dynamic from the technical issue; anchoring to documentation when there is a dispute about what was

agreed; focusing every conversation on what the project needs rather than what any individual party wants; and preserving relationships through professional conduct even under pressure.

Adaptability and Problem-Solving Under Pressure

Field conditions will always diverge from the plan. A relocation timeline slips. A design change introduces a new conflict. A utility owner loses crew availability a week before the construction window.

The coordinator who can absorb new information, recalibrate, and communicate implications clearly while keeping the project moving is an asset that cannot be replaced by technical knowledge alone. Adaptability is not passively accepting change. It is evaluating implications quickly and presenting a clear path forward.

Organization, Time Management, and Follow-Through

These three skills are easy to underestimate and quietly underpin everything else. A coordinator on a complex project is managing multiple utilities, multiple deadlines, multiple approval processes, and multiple stakeholder relationships simultaneously.

Follow-through is where a significant amount of coordination value is lost. Decisions are made in meetings, and action items are agreed upon, and then they drift. Confirming that utility work was completed as planned, and that agreements were implemented in the field and not just in the minutes, is what keeps commitments credible and risk controlled.

4. Documentation: The Single Strongest Risk Tool

Written documentation is the form of communication that lasts. Four documents matter most in utility coordination.

MEETING MINUTES	Decisions made, actions agreed, and owners identified, sent within 24 hours. Memories diverge after that window.
CONFLICT MATRIX	A live register of every identified utility conflict, its current status, the responsible party, and the resolution path. This is a working tool, not a filing exercise.
DECISION LOG	Capturing why a decision was made, not just what was decided, is essential when circumstances change or when a decision is later questioned.
ESCALATION RECORD	Documenting when issues were flagged, to whom, and how they were resolved. This is the evidence trail that protects everyone on the project.

Good documentation prevents disputes, maintains continuity when team members change, provides evidence if claims arise, and speeds up future decisions because the context is already captured. It's not bureaucracy, it's the professional standard.

5. Soft Skills Across the Project Lifecycle

The specific demands on a coordinator shift as a project moves through its phases. The eight core soft skills apply differently depending on where the project is.

Project Phase	Primary Skill Demand	Key Actions
Planning	Communication	Introduce roles, set process expectations, build early stakeholder relationships.
Design	Collaboration	Identify conflicts alongside designers, engage utility owners in resolution strategy.

Project Phase	Primary Skill Demand	Key Actions
Pre-Construction	Conflict Resolution	Confirm relocations, resolve remaining disputes, align contractors and owner timelines.
Construction	Adaptability	Respond to field surprises, communicate new conflicts quickly, escalate where needed.

No single skill dominates all phases. The best coordinators develop fluency across all of them and apply the right skill at the right moment. Their default mode is proactive rather than reactive.

6. Navigating Competing Priorities

Every utility coordination project involves stakeholders with genuinely different, and sometimes conflicting, goals. Understanding those perspectives is not optional. It is the basis for every effective coordination decision.

UTILITY OWNER	Primary concern is service continuity and operational safety. Any relocation that creates risk to infrastructure serving thousands of people is a serious matter.
DESIGNER	Focus is constructability and alignment with design intent. Utility conflicts must be resolved in a way that does not compromise the project's engineering.
CONTRACTOR	Thinking about schedule adherence and cost control. Every day the critical path is affected has real financial consequences.

None of these priorities is wrong. They are all legitimate. The coordinator's role is not to choose a side. It is to understand each perspective well enough to facilitate compromises that reduce overall project risk, and to hold the conversation in a way that keeps everyone at the table.

This is where communication, active listening, and relationship skills all converge into a single professional capability.

7. The Cost of Communication Breakdown

The clearest argument for investing in soft skills is a direct look at what happens when they break down.

When Soft Skills Are Weak

- Construction delays when parties are not aligned on scope, sequence, or timing.
- Change orders when conflicts that should have been resolved in design surface during construction.
- Safety risks when utility locations are unknown or miscommunicated to field crews.
- Formal disputes that consume management time and damage long-term relationships.
- Loss of trust that persists into future projects with the same organizations.

When Soft Skills Are Strong

- Issues surface earlier, often before they affect the schedule at all.
- Stakeholders stay aligned, and decisions happen faster.
- Relationships deepen through consistent professional conduct.
- Cumulative project risk decreases as problems are resolved at lower cost.
- Repeat engagement increases as clients and partners experience reliable, low-friction delivery.

The business case is not complicated. Projects with effective communication execute more smoothly, produce fewer disputes, and deliver better outcomes for everyone involved. Soft skills are not supplementary to risk management. They are risk management.

8. The Utility Coordinator as Project Leader

Utility coordinators are leaders. Not because of formal authority, most coordinators have limited formal authority over the parties they work with, but because of what they do.

They guide communication across organizations that do not naturally talk to each other. They facilitate collaboration between parties with competing interests. They manage risk in environments of genuine uncertainty. And they bridge the technical and organizational dimensions of complex projects in a way that no single discipline can do alone.

That is leadership defined by influence, clarity, and accountability. The best coordinators understand this about themselves. They do not wait for permission to communicate proactively. They do not wait for conflict to become a crisis before addressing it. They create the conditions for good outcomes consistently, across projects, across stakeholders, across phases.

Developing soft skills is developing leadership capacity. That investment pays returns throughout a career.

Conclusion: Five Principles to Apply Now

The argument of this paper is straightforward: soft skills are a professional discipline and a core risk management tool in utility coordination. Here are five principles to carry forward.

SOFT SKILLS ARE CORE	They are not supplementary. They are integral to managing project risk. The technical work does not speak for itself, it must be communicated, coordinated, and followed through.

MOST FAILURES TRACE TO COMMUNICATION	The pattern is consistent across the industry. The fix is communicating earlier, more clearly, and more consistently.
PROACTIVE BEATS REACTIVE	Proactive communication prevents escalation. Reactive communication manages damage. The gap between those two outcomes is usually the quality of the coordination that preceded the problem.
RELATIONSHIPS COMPOUND	Every interaction either builds or erodes trust. Trust built through consistency and professionalism compounds across projects and organizations.
INFLUENCE IS THE REAL AUTHORITY	The best coordinators lead through clarity and influence, not title. Developing soft skills is developing the capacity to deliver in complex environments regardless of formal authority.

Pick one skill and commit to applying it differently on your next project. Identify where communication can happen earlier. Choose one stakeholder relationship to invest in more deliberately. Build one documentation habit that closes a gap in your current practice.

The compounding effect of these choices, applied consistently, is what separates good coordination from excellent coordination, and excellent coordination from the kind that becomes a trusted standard on every project it touches.

About 4Sight Utility Engineers

4Sight Utility Engineers is Canada's leading authority in Utility Engineering, Subsurface Utility Engineering (SUE) and Utility Coordination.

Our team of dedicated professionals deliver clarity where uncertainty creates the greatest risk, helping to shape smarter decisions from the very beginning.