

Creating a Communication Plan

A Communications Plan is an excellent way of helping to support staff and user involvement during a campaign or project and will reduce the risk of miscommunication.

A communication plan involves managers thinking through the message they need to convey; understanding the key audiences for the message; and working out the best way to deliver their message (see Communications Channel toolkit).

The amount of work managers need to undertake should reflect the size of the communication issue for example if the issue is minor it may not be necessary to do a full-blown stakeholder analysis. For a larger change management issue e.g. managers may want to hold focus groups, devote full-time resources to communications, develop full project management schedules etc.

The following Communications Roadmap can be used to help ensure that communications is an integral part of an overall project or campaign plan.

WHY

- Clearly state the business need for communication
- What is your goal for this communication?

WHO – DEFINE YOUR AUDIENCE

- To what degree does the audience know and understand the issue?
- What do you want your audience to do because of the message?
- What new attitudes and behaviours will the audience need to adopt to be successful?
- Are there any specific factors that you need to be aware of – i.e. cynicism, shift work etc

WHAT – KEY MESSAGES

- What does the audience need to know?
- What do you want to tell your audience?
- Where can the audience go for more information?
- What's in it for me message?

WHEN – TIMING

- Will your message compete unnecessarily with, or be impacted by other events?
- Is it ever too late to communicate?

HOW – METHODS

- What tools are available – intranet; dialogue; briefings; newsletters etc?
- What tools are most effective to reach your audience?

WHERE – VENUE

- Hallways V Boardroom V offsite?
- What offers less distraction?
- Most accessible for your audience?

Pilot testing a draft communication

Before distributing a critical communication broadly, it is always a good idea to pilot test it with the target audience. This could be as simple as getting some quick feedback from a few target recipients if there are time constraints or the issue is not a major one. A better approach is to convene focus groups with the target audience to assess the communication plan:

1. Plan to hold two or three focus groups, each made up of six to ten people targeted to receive the communication.
2. Send focus group participants the draft communication a few days in advance. Ask them to review it and note their reactions.
3. During the focus group meeting ask these questions:
 - What's your general reaction to the communication?
 - What did you find consistent?
 - What was contradictory?
 - What should be added, deleted or modified to improve the communication?
 - After reading the communication what message did you take from it?
 - What actions or decisions does this communication prepare you for?
4. At the close of the session, thank participants for their input and tell them they will see it reflected in the final product; there's no need to distribute a feedback summary.
5. Modify the planned communication based on the input received.

Survey employees

Following a large scale communication event, managers can send a short survey to a random sample of employees to gather feedback in five general categories outlined below. The results should be compared to target benchmarks set at the start of the project. Lessons learned can be applied to future communications plans.

1. **Level of awareness:** assessed through yes/no questions – ‘Have you heard about the Programme?’ (yes/no)
2. **Understanding key points;** assessed through test of knowledge questions – ‘How many key projects are underway?’
3. **Perceptions of changes or initiative;** assessed through level of agreement questions – ‘The Programme is designed to improve services to services users?’ (agree/disagree scale)
4. **Improvement suggestions;** assessed through open ended questions – ‘What should be done to improve communication about the Programme?’ (write in response).

If managers can ask these four questions after a communication event/initiative, they will get a pretty good snapshot of the communication plan results.