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Engage Key Stakeholders with a Successful Communications Plan

The 4 Dimensions of Successful Communication

No one likes to feel left out or overlooked, and when key stakeholders feel that way, the results can be painful and long lasting. I recently conducted a focus group of community leaders who expressed serious concerns about the lack of communication within a significant countywide initiative. One woman went so far as to say that being involved in the project felt like being a kid whose parents were getting divorced, but the parents weren't talking openly about what was going on, leaving the kid feeling stressed out. That is how bad the lack of communications on this project was.

When I asked the group what could be done to fix this, another participant said something I'll never forget: "Communications need to be top-down, bottom-up, inside out, and all around." I think that sums up the components of an effective communications plan.

The next time you launch a new grantmaking program or initiative for any issue – early childhood development, education, economic development, anything – think through these four aspects of your communication needs so that none of your key stakeholders feel overlooked.

Top Down

Make sure there are strategies in place for those who are managing, governing, and funding the initiative to communicate regularly with all the organizations, grantees, and partners that are doing the work. There are likely a lot of moving parts, and priorities may need to shift based on things that are well beyond the control of the initiative, such as changes in the economy or in government. It's important for you to be as transparent as possible and to ensure that your partners can count on you for regular updates.

Bottom Up

Similarly, you want to make sure that there are regular opportunities for everyone involved in the initiative – grantees, evaluators, vendors, and other stakeholders – to regularly communicate with people who are managing the initiative. This method can be anything that works for you: monthly meetings, quarterly check-ins, regular conference calls, or whatever allows people to feel comfortable and have a regular opportunity to bring up issues or concerns as they emerge, rather than a month or a year later when it's too late.

Inside Out

By this I mean that everyone involved in your program needs to be regularly communicating and coordinating with each other. If you're trying to create change within a community, or influence the system, it likely means that the people and organizations need to do things differently. They might need to coordinate their work better or make joint decisions, so you need to put systems in place to allow for the communication and coordination to happen.



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All Around

The final way to think about your communications needs is to think about what's all around you – in other words, external communications. Think of it this way: If you could draw a circle that encompassed you and your grantees and partners, then look outside that circle and think about who is not involved but should be, who needs to know about what you're doing, who else you should be influencing, and who might be trying to work against you but you need to engage. Once you've identified those groups, then think about what each group needs to know and how you might best communicate that.

Resolving your communications challenges is one critical component of positioning your foundation for success. When it comes to communications, there is no silver-bullet solution. Instead, leveraging all of these dimensions – top-down, bottom-up, inside out, and all around – is the key to eradicating your communications challenges and successfully engaging all of your stakeholders.

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