

How to Develop a Communications Plan

There are five steps in developing a communication plan:

1. Gain an understanding of the basic elements of communication
2. Gather and organise information
3. Collect additional information
4. Document communication plan
5. Follow up

Gain an understanding of the basic elements of Communication

To prepare an effective communication plan for a client, you must first understand the elements which collectively operate to produce the results of “communication”.

There are six basic elements of communication:

- a. Sender
- b. Message
- c. Vehicle/Channel
- d. Feedback Mechanism
- e. Receiver
- f. Timeframe

It can be useful to discuss these six components with a client or use them for your own planning purposes:

- a. **Sender** - Individuals within the organisation who will communicate (or “send”) the message: The sender’s attitudes toward the change, willingness to champion the change, and ability to influence others are a few of the psychological factors which must be considered when selecting senders. Projects typically have two senders: one who creates/packages the message (consultant), and another who delivers the message (senior client).
- b. **The Message** - To be effective, a message must be tailored to the particular frame of reference of the receiver group. This involves tailoring both the tone and the informational content of the message.
- c. **The Vehicle/Channels** - Vehicles/channels are paths through which a message is transmitted through the organisation. Vehicles include written memos, electronic mail, telephone call and bulletin board.
- d. **Feedback Mechanism** - Feedback is critical for determining the effectiveness of a communication plan and its messages. Establishing a feedback mechanism also provides visible evidence to the receivers that their reactions/suggestions are valued and that they can make a difference.

- e. **The Receiver** - The receivers may consist of both internal and external stakeholders (e.g. employees and customers). They may be defined in a number of ways, including geographic location, years of experience with the Company, or role within the organisation (e.g. middle managers, administrative support, or line workers).
- f. **Timeframe** - The timeframe of the communications should be based on the schedule of the change events and the information needs of the stakeholders. The timeframe of your communication may vary with the sender, message and the receiver group. Depending on the channel and the message, the communication may be a one-time event (e.g. a kick-off presentation) or a continuous channel (e.g. monthly newsletter).

Gather and organise information

This step requires the collection and organisation of communication, and may involve interviews, meetings, and/or documentation reviews.

The information gathered will help complete the following:

- a. ***Identify the Stakeholders/Receivers***

The stakeholders are those individuals, both external and internal to the organisation, who will be impacted by the change.

- b. ***Identify the Receiver Characteristics***

Use [OPSR Communication Profile Matrix.doc](#), to analyse the characteristics of each potential receiver group. Consider the “Communication Influences” listed on the left. How will these influences impact the reaction of the receivers to the message? Document both the positive and negative effects in the “Comments/Considerations” column. In cases where the impact of influences is negative, document how the communication plan should deal with this obstacle (“Recommended Action” column).

- c. ***Define the Message***

Is it important to consider a group’s frame of reference when defining the message. Think about what their concerns, fears and information needs might be. Often, the purpose will prescribe the content of the message and the appropriate senders of the message.

In some situations, employees’ fears are warranted. Job cutbacks or redeployment may require management to deliver “bad news” to the workforce.

- d. ***Select the Sender(s)***

Select potential client senders. It is important to select senders who have the respect and trust of the receivers. A sender’s position within the organisation and expertise in the subject matter will affect their credibility.

You may identify different senders for different receiver groups. Determine if senders require training to effectively deliver a message.

e. *Identify Potential Vehicles/Channels*

Use **OPSR Communication Vehicles.doc**, to select appropriate communication vehicles. The horizontal axis rates each vehicle (highest to lowest) according to the labour it requires. The vertical axis presents dimensions or characteristics of the message. The intersection indicates how appropriate (High/Medium/Low) each channel is, given the characteristics/dimensions of the message.

f. *Identify Potential Feedback Mechanism(s)*

The benefits of implementing a feedback mechanism include:

- Improved future communications, and
- Increased acceptance of the change by the workforce.

Select a feedback mechanism which is cost-efficient and which best fits with the communication vehicle you choose. For example, if you distribute a newsletter, you might include a self-addressed survey card in the newsletter itself.

g. *Establish Timeframe*

In general, plan to communicate early and often, and maintain communication through all phases of the engagement.

Collect additional information

Once you have gathered the critical information, you may need to collect additional information to supplement your understanding of the organisation's communication structure.

For example:

- You may need actual distribution figures for paper-based channels;
- You may need to conduct survey or tutor groups to collect data regarding the effectiveness of existing channels;
- You may need to research budget data pertaining to existing communication channels.

Document Communication Plan

The communication plan can be constructed in a number of ways, either by a group (such as the senior management team) or by an individual (HR, PR or external consultant, with the plan then reviewed by the group).

The process of documenting a communication plan is iterative. Information from one area provides additional input to another, causing the plan to be continually refined.

The information collected in steps 2 and 3 will serve as the foundation for the communication plan document. The information gathered will include:

- **Basic Elements of Communication:** sender, receiver, message, channel, timeframe, feedback.
- **Implementation Issues:** person(s) responsible, projected budgets for communication.
- **Preparatory Activities:** analysis of required training for senders and development of rationales for the communication plan's various components.

You can use the [OPSR Communication Plan Worksheet.doc](#) to summarise this information. Each section is as follows:

- **Message** - This column requires a high-level statement of the purpose of the message.
- **Receiver/Stakeholder** - The description in this column can indicate the number of people to be reached in the audience. Remember to consider the receiver group's role and influence within the organisation, in addition to its frame of reference.
- **Vehicle/Channel** - The description of the channel should remain at a high level. Details will be filled in later in the project.
- **Sender** - The general office, level or group required for the sender should be indicated here, rather than names,
- **Timeframe (Message)** - Indicate the date or dates on which the communication will take place. Specify if the messages are "one time" or "continuous".
- **Feedback Mechanism** - Indicate how the project team responsible for communication will measure the effectiveness of the communication and deal with audience questions and concerns. State, in this column, how the workforce will be made aware that this channel is designed to address their concerns.
- **Responsible** - Document who in the project team and/or in the client organisation is responsible for organising the communication.
- **Timeframe (Feedback)** - Indicate when the feedback channels are to be put in place.
- **Sender Preparation** - It may be necessary for the senders to receive training on competencies/skills/knowledge they will need to adequately deliver the message e.g. effective presentations, effective listening, effective meeting facilitation and effective business writing may be critical to the success of the message delivery.
- **Rationale** - Record the rationale at a high level of detail. Be sure to include a rationale for the various components in the communication plan. Documentation will facilitate the management review process and promote client buy-in.

After completing the Communication Plan Worksheet, use the OPSR Communication Profile Matrix.doc as an additional validation. The following questions act as a further "reality" check:

- What is the probable attitude of the receivers toward the message and what are the implications of that attitude?
- What are the best channels for communication?
- Who can communicate the messages to maximise acceptance?
- What other influences of organisational communication need to be managed?

Follow-up

The final phase of the communication plan is to refine and update the plan to incorporate the feedback received.

Based on the feedback, you may identify:

- Different senders
- A revised timeframe
- A different tone or expanded content for the message
- Additional receiver groups
- Additional training needs of the senders
- A new communication vehicle which will simplify or facilitate future organisational communications.