

- What is communication?
- What do communication problems look like?
- How do you deal with communication problems?
- Handling crises in communication

Suppose you issue a press release about a meeting you're holding to help inform people about your initiative, and you give the newspaper the wrong date. That's a problem.

Suppose you issue the same press release with the right information, and no one shows up to your meeting. That's a problem.

Suppose you issue the same press release, and a whole crowd of angry people with torches and pitchforks come to the meeting, ready to attack you because of your message. That's a crisis!

Suppose that everything's going well for your organization: the torches and pitchforks are long gone, you've got the respect of the community, you're getting funding, the organization's doing what it's supposed to do...and a staff member makes the news by getting arrested for drunken driving, or passing bad checks, or worse. That's a crisis!

Faced with any of these situations, or others like them, what are you going to do? If you're caught without a clue, your organization could be in deep trouble. But there are ways to plan for problems and crises in communication, and to deal with them effectively. Of course the most effective way of dealing with them is to do everything possible to make sure they never occur, but even the best preparation can fail sometimes. It's important to understand that communication issues will arise, and that having a plan for addressing them will make life easier when they do.

In this section, you'll get some brief ideas about communication in general:

- A look at some of the different types of problems that might arise as you are trying to get your message out to the community.
- Some suggestions for dealing with those problems.
- A short discussion of the difference between a problem and a crisis.
- Some recommendations for managing true crises.
- Examples of organizations that have dealt with problems and crises successfully.

What is communication?

When we talk about communication, we're mainly referring to what is known as "the process of transmitting ideas and information about your initiative throughout the community." Although doing this well may involve looking at communication within your organization, the communication we're concerned with here is between you and the community. This might be direct (information, like flyers or ads, that goes straight from you to the community with no one

else in between ) or indirect (information that goes through someone else, like newspaper stories ).

1. *Communication is not one-sided.* You can blanket the community with information, but if that information isn't understood, or isn't understood in the way you meant it, you might as well not have bothered. Any good communicator has to empathize with the audience and try to understand what they will think and how they will feel about what they hear or see.
2. *Communication involves more than words.* It can include body language and tone of voice, as well as the attitude and general tone that are projected in speech, writing or actions. Therefore, an organization has to make sure that anyone or anything that represents it projects in every way a respectful and welcoming style that includes everyone in the community.
3. *Different groups often communicate using different styles and assumptions.* People's gender, racial and cultural background, educational experience, and perceptions of who has power all influence how they receive and interpret communication. It's absolutely necessary to know your audience, and think carefully about how they'll look at what your organization presents.

In many Middle Eastern countries, for instance, personal space is defined differently than in the US. Here, we tend to keep our distance from others, usually a minimum of 18" to two feet, when we're talking to them. In much of the Middle East, the polite distance is more like 12" or less. The result is that Middle Easterners may feel that Americans are standoffish or cold, whereas Americans may feel natives of that area are pushy, or even a little frightening, because they stand so close.

To communicate effectively, organizations have to take all of these ideas into account.

What do communication problems look like?

There are many different kinds of problems that can crop up when you're trying to let the community or a particular group know who you are, what you're doing, and why they should care. Some problems have to do with your presentation of your message, and others are dependent on other people's perceptions of what you're doing and what you stand for. Because these issues are different, they call for different kinds of resolutions. In this part of the section, we look at some of the problems you might face in trying to let the community know about you. Later on, we offer some ways to deal with them.

**Common communication problems:**

- *Your message isn't reaching your target population.* For some reason, the people you're trying to reach aren't hearing about you and what you have to tell them.
- *People don't understand or misunderstand your message.* Either folks have no idea what you're trying to say, or - worse - they think you're saying something other than what you think you're saying. This could include members of the target population not understanding that your message is meant for them, or it could lead to the next problem if they misunderstand in a particular way.
- *People take issue or disagree with your message, or find it offensive in some way.* The differences between you might be political or philosophical, or you might have used some language that people believe is offensive or threatening. In any case, you now have antagonists out there who are upset with you.

A message which uses a term which a particular group--or, even worse, your target group--interprets as racist or demeaning, for instance, can make your relationship with that group extremely difficult. This issue is complicated by the fact that sometimes it is difficult to tell which terms are acceptable and which are not.

Another possible error in this direction is to seem to blame or demonize a particular group when analyzing a problem. For example, if the local business community sees itself as being portrayed as the villain in a discussion of unemployment, whether or not that was the intent of the message, they are unlikely to support your organization.

- *People dislike or distrust your organization, and therefore take issue with what they think your message is, even if they haven't actually heard the message itself.* Again, your differences may be political, philosophical, or otherwise, but whatever the reason, these people know that you're the enemy.

Organizations like Planned Parenthood often run into this sort of hostility. Because such organizations consider abortion to be one among many options available to pregnant women, many pro-life individuals or groups may see them as fostering something evil, and may not know - or care - that these organizations provide many other reproductive health services.

- *Your message has been garbled or misrepresented in the media.* Every organization has had this experience at least once. It could be the result of your error, a reporter's error or inexperience, or even outright ill will on the part of the reporter or his/her employer. You have to deal with the fallout no matter why it happened.

Sometimes, the issue is simply one of the emphasis a reporter places on a story. In an article about a Read-a-thon being run by the adult literacy organization I worked for, the local paper chose to highlight a quote by a staff member about the difference between "Band-Aid" services,

like survival programs and homeless shelters, and services which focused on people's long term prospects, like adult literacy. The human service community immediately erupted, and calming the situation took numerous phone calls and letters to the Editor explaining that we hadn't meant that those services weren't necessary - on the contrary, we believed they were all too necessary - but rather that it was important to look at both immediate and long-term needs when trying to serve a low -income population in a time of sinking economy and diminishing jobs.

- *You make an unfortunate error, which has larger consequences.*

A fine example of this occurred when one of the editors of this section was editing a community newsletter. When he listed the toll-free number for ordering a community video, he reversed some digits, and the newsletter went out with a number for gay phone sex. People who tried were somewhat puzzled when they called to order the video.

How do you deal with communication problems?

Now that you have some idea of what kinds of problems you could run into, you need to look at some ways to address them. As we said earlier, different problems require different solutions. But there are also some overall guidelines that should help in dealing with any communication difficulties...or any communication, for that matter.

General guidelines for dealing with communication problems.

- *First, try to find out exactly what the problem is.* Why is a particular group angry with you? What do they think the issues are? What, specifically, are people not understanding about your message? Don't be afraid to ask: people are usually more than willing to state their position, or to explain what they're confused about.
- *Avoid rhetoric, but be honest in all situations.* Don't try to change the intent of your message to please someone, unless you really think they're right and you 're really going to change what you were planning to do. (Sometimes, a change is justified, and won't have a great effect on your mission. Other times it would negate what you're trying to do. If you think a change might be in order, make sure you have carefully thought out and discussed what it would mean for your goals and purposes before you make a decision.)

Rhetoric, as the word is used here, is speech that is politically or otherwise "loaded" in order to make a point stronger. Using terms like "fascist" or "commie liberal" are immediately noticeable examples, but there are subtler ways of using rhetoric as well.

Oversimplifying a situation, stating the case as if there were only one side that decent people could possibly take, and framing the issue as Good vs. Evil are all ways of making a powerful case for your position while alienating anyone who disagrees with you. Being honest means not backing down from what you believe, but implying, at least, that you understand that people on

the other side are not necessarily motivated only by personal gain or mean-spirited impulses. That leaves the door open for conversation, and for finding, as is often possible, common ground.

- *Try to talk with members of any group that is angry with or opposes you.* Really listen to what they have to say, and take it seriously. Some of their criticisms may have merit, or you may be able to address their concerns in a way that satisfies them and earns their trust. In any case, they will be far less angry if they know they have been heard.
- *Be as flexible as possible without betraying what you believe in and are working for.* Be willing to rethink ways of doing or saying things, or to look for solutions that include more groups of people.
- *Treat everyone with respect.* Try to see and understand your opponents' point of view, and why their reasons make sense to them. Even if you continue to disagree, your relationship can be civil if respect is maintained.
- *In trying to correct the problem, always take responsibility and apologize for anything that was your fault.* Even if it makes you look stupid, it's always better to admit that you were wrong and that you're sorry for it. If it wasn't your fault, you should explain what happened so people will understand the error, unless the explanation is likely to alienate someone you need to work with.
- *Regardless of what the problem is, keep restating the message you want people to hear in the ways in which they're most likely to hear it.* You want your message to be the one that people remember in the long run.

Dealing with specific communication problems.

*Your message isn't reaching your target population.* If you examine your language, your assumptions about the people you're trying to reach, and your assumptions about how and where they can be reached, you're probably well on your way to solving the problem. Checking with members of the group you're aiming at about what's likely to work, and then using it, seems obvious, but if it hasn't been done beforehand, it's worth mentioning.

- Are you using the language that most people in your target population actually speak, or prefer to speak (e.g., Spanish in Hispanic neighborhoods)? If so, is your language too "educated" for them to understand or respond to? Are you assuming knowledge, of written English, for instance, that most people in your target population simply don't have?
- Are you using ways of getting the word out that people are likely to pay attention to?
- What are the channels of communication that the people you are trying to reach use? What do they hear, or read, or watch? Whom do they listen to? Where are they likely to be found?

When a colleague and I had no apparent luck attracting people to our adult literacy program with newspaper ads and brochures, we realized that print was probably not the best way to reach people who didn't read well. Along with as much word-of-mouth as we could generate through human service workers and others, we started using flyers with just a few simple words on them: "Need reading, writing, GED? Call..." We put tear-off phone numbers on the bottom so people wouldn't have to write anything down. Then we thought about where to find the people we were looking for. In addition to the human service offices, supermarkets, and store windows we had been using, we started putting flyers up in laundromats, fast food restaurants, bars, and the hospital emergency room. We talked to bartenders, nurses, and cashiers about our program. Soon, there was a steady trickle of potential students finding its way to our door. We had found language that people could understand, had figured out a way to deliver it that people could easily respond to, and had put our message where it was likely to be seen and heard.

*People don't understand--or misunderstand--your message. You've somehow missed the mark. What are you doing wrong, and how can you fix it?*

- Once again, you need to examine your language and assumptions. Are you using the wrong language, or assuming that your audience has some knowledge that it really doesn't?
- Find out what people think you're saying. It may be that a single word or phrase is changing or confusing your message for most people; if you can spot it and change it, your problem may be solved.
- Examine the message itself. Do you understand clearly what it is you want to say? If not, you need to hash it out so that you can state it in terms anyone can understand.
- Restate the message more clearly, and test out the new version with people who represent your audience, to make sure they understand what you intend.
- If appropriate, apologize for any misunderstanding, and restate your real message strongly.

*People take issue or disagree with your message, or find it offensive in some way. Disagreement can take a number of forms, and it's important to know exactly what you're dealing with.*

- Are opponents' issues based on political or philosophical differences about your basic premise (i.e. do they think you're just dead wrong?) Or are they based on the wording or presentation of your message? Do opponents feel your message demeans or attacks a particular group, or misstates an issue? Can you change the message to respond to these concerns?
- Try to establish communication with those who disagree with you. Can you respond to their concerns without compromising your goals or principles? What, if any, are your

points of agreement? Can you work together in some ways? Are you willing to discuss their issues over time?

- Are you at least partially in the wrong? Are opponents right in any of their objections? Is a public or private apology or retraction in order?
- What are the consequences of continued disagreement? Can you agree to disagree in a civil way, and would that be OK for your organization?
- If your differences are not resolvable, make sure that your point of view is always stated clearly and correctly. Often, it is helpful to have it stated by people with status or credibility in the community who support your group. Continue to treat opponents with respect, but always do your homework, so that side issues can't be used as an excuse for negating your message. Make sure that anything stated as fact by either side is accurate.
- If all else fails, be prepared to play hardball by marshaling political backing, staging demonstrations, etc. If your opponents won't move, you need to be strong.
- Finally, redouble your efforts to send your message to those you want to reach. Persistence is key.

In a small community, a grassroots group formed to protest the proposed building of a plant which would reprocess heavy metals. The group was concerned with safety issues, and with the question of what the community would gain if the plant was opened. Many community leaders, who felt the plant would bring needed tax income and jobs, at first refused to deal with the group at all. They attempted to discredit the group by pointing out that one of the leaders was on welfare (which was true, but totally irrelevant), and by saying that it wasn't representative of the community. The group persisted, holding its own public meetings and attending those held by others, and continually trying to engage in dialogue about the issue. Eventually, the grassroots group was included in a panel to study the proposal.

Four members of the group did research to find out about other plants the company ran in other parts of the country. They found that elsewhere, the company's promises of jobs had not been fulfilled, that wages in other plants were lower than those promised in their community, and that there were in fact safety issues with several of the company's other plants. Ultimately, the company withdrew, and the plant wasn't built. The group had successfully countered opposition by stating its message consistently, doing its homework, keeping communication open, and keeping at it.

*People dislike or distrust your organization, and therefore take issue with what they think your message is, even if they haven't actually heard the message itself.*

How you deal with this kind of problem depends upon why the problem exists. If the people merely misunderstand what your group does or stands for, then it's purely a communication issue, and can be handled as such. If a group feels attacked by what you're saying or trying to do, that's a different kind of issue. If you're seen as representing a religious, political, or social value

system which a particular group of people finds threatening or hateful, that presents a whole new set of difficulties. A group may have and give out an inaccurate version of your message because they mistakenly think they know what you think. Or they may be misrepresenting you intentionally.

- Try to allay fears, but don't misrepresent your ideas. It may be that those whom you see as representing something they distrust or fear - or hate - are right. If they are, the best you can do may be to try to keep talking and look for common ground.
- If your message or your organization is being misrepresented, whether intentionally or unintentionally, it is absolutely necessary that you respond immediately. You need to find the best medium in which to correct false information or impressions. It could be the press or other mass media, a public forum, word of mouth, the Internet...it depends on whom you're trying to reach, and what the nature of the community is. However, it's important to avoid attacking or bad-mouthing the other side: treat everyone respectfully, tell the truth, and answer questions. If there's a moral high ground, you want to be seen as occupying it. If your opposition chooses to do the same, there's that much more chance of some resolution.
- Do everything you can to make your message stronger and more widely available than that of your opposition.

*Your message has been garbled or misrepresented in the media.* As we said earlier, this happens a lot. There are really two strategies here: first, try to make sure it doesn't happen in the first place; and second, address it if it happens despite your efforts to prevent it.

- Successful prevention entails establishing a close relationship with the media, and particularly with finding a sympathetic person at each outlet--newspaper, radio or TV station--to deal with directly. You can head off errors by providing key points and descriptions--especially those that they've gotten wrong in the past--to reporters and others. Even though they'll probably rewrite whatever you give them, they'll be more likely to get it right. Remembering to call your contacts when interesting stories are available will always be remembered in turn, and will get you both coverage and support when you need them. It's also helpful to try to become an "expert" to whom the media turn when they're trying to understand or report on the issue your organization is concerned with. And be available, no matter how much trouble it is, when media people call.
- If, in spite of your efforts, you still get misrepresented, take steps to correct the error right away. In the case of a simple error, a letter to the editor or a press release may do the trick.

- If the misrepresentation was intentional, you may have to find a different avenue of communication to get the correction out.

A newspaper editor, who was feuding with the local School Committee and Superintendent, often printed misinformation about them and refused to publish letters or press releases correcting it. Several School Committee members realized that there was a local website where members of the community aired concerns, and that many of those most inflamed by the paper's misrepresentations logged onto it regularly. Those members started using the website to correct errors and to give the schools' side of the story. Within a fairly short time, many of the rumors and controversies started by the paper had been stifled, and a civil dialogue had begun.

*You make an unfortunate error, which has larger consequences.* In this circumstance, there are really two things you need to do.

- Correct the error as quickly as possible, through as many channels as possible. Use the media, flyers, word of mouth, and/or anything else you can think of to get news of the error and the corrected information out to as many people as possible.
- Take full responsibility for the error as soon as you discover it, and apologize profusely, publicly, and often.
- Be as self-deprecating and good-humored as seems appropriate; if people can see the situation as humorous, and see your organization as good-naturedly acknowledging its error, they're more likely to be on your side, rather than being furious. But be careful: some mistakes just aren't funny, and if your organization seems to be making light of a serious situation, this tactic can backfire.

## Handling crises in communication

What's the difference between a problem and a crisis?

So far, we've been talking about problems in communication. Some of them are pretty serious--having a powerful group opposed to what you stand for is no joke--but they usually don't mean life or death for your organization. A *crisis* is, by definition, a make-or-break point, one that can send a situation, an individual, or an organization either way.

A *crisis* in communication involves a situation where the life, or at least the well-being, of your organization is really in the balance. A crisis could make the organization stronger, weaken it considerably, or even kill it. A crisis is more serious than just having powerful opposition, or getting the date of a clinic wrong. It means being put in a place where an outside force could shut the organization down, where funding and support could be withdrawn, or where public disapproval could become so strong that the organization would be totally ineffective. It also means that a positive resolution of such a crisis could make the organization look better than it

ever has, or make it seem tremendously competent and ethical. There's no way to guarantee the better result, but there are some things you can do to make it more likely.

### Planning for a crisis in communication

You're the Director of an organization that's dependent on the good will of the community. It's 8:00 on a Monday morning. You've come in early to get some work done, and you're surprised to hear the phone ring. It's the newspaper--not the local newspaper, but a large, regional daily. And the reporter on the other end starts asking you questions about a staff member who left the organization only months before. You realize that the person in question has been involved in a horrendous crime. Would you know what to do or say?

This actually happened to me, and it wasn't an experience that I'd like to repeat. Ultimately, the organization was able to deal with the publicity in a positive way...but it could have been disastrous. It would have been much easier if we'd had a crisis management plan.

M. Booth and Associates of the Foundation Center include a section on Crisis Management in their book, *Promoting Issues and Ideas: A Guide to Public Relations for Nonprofit Organizations*. According to them, "the best way to deal with a crisis is to plan for it before it happens." They say that all organizations should have a crisis committee, which, in turn, needs to have a crisis management plan. Ideally, everyone in the organization *should* have a written copy of such a plan. Thus, when a crisis arises, the organization is ready to address it, and it's the committee's job to automatically put the plan into effect. Booth and Associates suggest a plan which includes the following elements:

- *Determine the seriousness of the situation.* What are the possible negative consequences to the organization? What can you do to minimize them? Can you keep the story from breaking? If not, can you make sure that it's accurate? How can you make sure that the real tasks of the organization get done while this is going on?
- *Develop position statements, answers to potential questions, and fact sheets that aggressively set forth your organization's position.* You may or may not need them, but it's important to have them if you do. It may sometimes be best if you break the story, rather than waiting for the papers.
- *Notify everyone who has a major stake in the organization: board members, staff, funders, "friends" who are supportive and can speak for the organization, etc.* Try to make sure that such people hear it from you, rather than reading about it in the paper.
- *Appoint one person to deal with the media.* This will eliminate any chance of different people giving different answers to questions, or of the message being unclear. If you're the spokesperson, you should...
  - Never refuse to talk to a reporter; by talking, you keep some control of the story.
  - Return reporters' calls on time, so they can make their deadlines.

- Decide on key points, and get those points across no matter what the questions are.
- Find out what reporters already know, so you don't give up any information unintentionally.
- Assume that everything you say is on the record, and could appear in the media. If you want to be off the record, you have to say so before you start talking, not after; and your statement might still be used, although not attributed to you.
- If you don't understand a question, say so.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to find it out.
- Offer to give the reporter the names of people who might provide third-party endorsements of your organization.
- Simply answer yes or no, or "I'm not going to answer that question," if you don't want to answer a question in detail or at all. If you have any hesitancy about answering a question, don't let yourself be pushed into it. Don't elaborate and don't explain.
- Ask when the story will appear.
- *Oversee the crisis management process.* Update the committee regularly, and make sure that the crisis management procedure is followed.
- *After the crisis has been resolved, bring all interested parties up to date.* If the crisis involved an organizational problem that was corrected, make sure news of the solution is circulated.
- *Don't forget that you have to deal with this issue within the organization as well as outside of it.* The sense of betrayal that staff or board members may feel if someone harms the organization, or the sense of shock if someone they work with turns out to be engaged in illegal or harmful activity, has to be acknowledged and resolved. Ultimately, there has to be some closure--a sense of the appropriate action having been taken, some healing having occurred, and the affair being over. Otherwise, the bad feelings left from this kind of situation can poison an organization indefinitely.
- *Remember to thank everyone who helped you handle the situation.*

### Dealing with a typical crisis

A crisis management plan like the one above can help an enormous amount to control the potential damage, but it isn't all that's needed. If we look at a specific situation, some other necessary elements come to light.

*Someone connected to your organization publicly says or does something which is profoundly offensive to the community.* This could include illegal activity, a remark which seemed innocent at the time, a bad decision, or rampant stupidity. The offender might be a participant, a staff member, a Board member...it doesn't really matter. The organization will take the heat for it,

almost no matter what the situation. There are a number of bases that need to be covered in order to address this type of situation.

- If the situation involves a written or spoken communication or action which is inherently offensive, or which attacks an individual or group, you should immediately and forcefully, through every channel available to you, emphasize that this is not the policy or opinion of the organization.
- State equally forcefully what the policy or opinion of the organization in this matter is, and continue to repeat it at every opportunity.
- Take responsibility and take it seriously. If it is appropriate to take action toward the offender (e.g. looking at whether to fire a staff member), make sure that action is contemplated, and keep the community informed of what's happening, at least at the "We're looking at this seriously and reviewing our options" level. If a staff or Board member is disciplined or fired or asked to resign, the public should know, although they don't necessarily need all the details.
- Apologize to whoever was offended or affected -- to the whole community, if that 's appropriate. And mean it.

### In Summary

The best way to deal with problems and crises in communication is to try to prevent them in the first place. Since this isn't always possible, when you're faced with a problem or crisis, it's important to remember...

- Identify the problem as clearly as possible.
- Try to talk with your target audience or with opponents face to face. Ask about and really listen to their objections to your message. Keep communication open, and stress the similarities, rather than the differences, between you.
- Be scrupulously honest, but avoid rhetoric. Be flexible without betraying your mission.
- Always treat everyone with respect. Try to understand their positions and reasons, and to allay their fears.
- Always take responsibility and apologize when the error or responsibility is yours.
- Keep restating your message clearly, and in terms people can understand. Always answer charges or misrepresentations, and do so forcefully, calmly, and with facts.

Remember finally that problems and crises, if they're handled properly, are not the end of the world. You have to expect that these things will happen occasionally, and that you need to have plans to address them. If, when people think of your organization, they remember a crisis in which you acted well, rather than whining and blame-casting, your chances of success are greatly increased. It has been said many times that the Chinese character for "crisis" combines the

characters for "danger" and "opportunity." Good preparation and a cool head can make the scale tip much further to the "opportunity " side.

**Contributor**

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**Resources**

**Print resources**

Booth, M. and Associates. *Promoting Issues and Ideas: A Guide to Public Relations for Nonprofit Organizations*. The Foundation Center.

**Internet resources**

Crisis Corporation, Ltd.

Offers various workshops and seminars in crisis management, including "Dealing with the Media in a Crisis."

[Institute for Crisis Management](#)

Bibliography of crisis management.

[Wright Communications](#)

Aimed at health care professionals. Workshops on handling media crises, media training.