

## **Communications Plan**

Communications plans can be developed in the context of a multi-year plan, a special initiative or crisis communication. Considering the following 8 strategic communication elements should cover all areas but will be different within different contexts:

### 1. Issue / Background

List the events and issues that determine the need for the plan. This could be the need to respond to public (accountability), bring new ideas to the table, involve your stakeholders, adapt to new ways of communicating etc. Under each issue, it can include the pros and cons that support it. This should also include reference to the division's mission and vision.

### 2. State the Goals and Objectives

What is the goal for the communication? For example, create understanding on both sides, hear the stakeholders' (public, staff, students, parents, special-interest groups) thoughts or gather their input, clarify issues, etc. What do we want to achieve? Have the stakeholders' support, minimize any dissension, discover new options, impart information, etc. You should include a timeframe e.g. is it a multi-year broad plan, is it one special issue, is it in response to a crisis?

### 3. Who are the Publics/Stakeholders?

List the people/groups you need to reach in order of importance. This should include anyone who is involved or could influence the outcome. List the characteristics of the publics. The list could include parents, students, regulators (RM, city council), government, local community groups (4-H, boy scouts), service (Rotary, Lions, Kinsmen) or faith-based groups, business, related (e.g. MASS) and non-related agencies (WRHA) etc.

### 4. What is our Key Message?

Prepare the message clearly and simply in one or two sentences that you want to share with your stakeholders. There can be more than one key message but there should not be too many (not more than 3) that your priorities get lost and you create confusion or blurriness. This section should also note how you intend to listen to the key publics, as well as what you intend to present to them. In preparation, you must answer 'What's in it for them?'. The key is the stakeholders must feel valued and listened to and not just preached to about your interests that may not match theirs. This really speaks to building trust and understanding. This is very important because you are elected and people expect more.

In this section you may also consider the larger picture and what is your 'brand'. This is closely tied to your vision and mission. It is a short sentence or words that capture how you want your publics to think of you or why they would chose you over others. It says the best about you – 'the best' as defined by you and it can't be a hollow boast. You must exhibit your brand in all facets of the division.

## 5. What Mediums will we Use?

The various mediums we intend to use in our communication need to be identified. It may be divisional face-to-face meetings, one-on-one sessions, representation at external meetings and invitations to your meetings, personal letters, newsletters, e-mail, a town hall, a “red phone” for questions, social media or some other means? When this is developed, it could also include key contact people (e.g. both designated leaders like a Chair and those that are viewed as leaders – the informal influencers).

The plan should also state communication frequency. For example can you go out and meet within the division, unveil a concept and listen to the feedback? Take some time to refine it and then go back and say you’ve listened and then present the proposal. Or do you want to do it at one meeting, followed by an update and some means to answer questions. The answer to these questions really depends on what a particular stakeholder needs and expects. If they are not “readers” you need to speak with them when necessary. Keep in mind some people learn by reading and others must hear the message. Successful communication involves both verbal and written messages. It also means presenting and listening. This part of the plan goes in concert with the next point.

## 6. Spokesperson

At the same time as you develop the section of the plan that includes the medium, you might also include the spokesperson as it likely won’t be the same for each medium. The Chair will be the authorized spokesperson on behalf of the board and the Superintendent the spokesperson on operational matters. You may also consider subject matter experts or medium experts (e.g. chair of the finance committee, a person experienced with social media or your most articulate speaker).

## 7. Budget

What is the cost of preparation, research, meetings, travel, mailing, equipment, printing, consulting? As you build your plan this can be determined. Getting the message across and building trust and support is the key rather than the medium so you may not have to use a multi-faceted, glossy approach. You may avoid costly four colour brochures but it does not mean you put out presentations or materials that look second rate. What you do and how it looks and sounds should reflect professional standards and instill confidence.

## 8. Measurement and Evaluation

How do you intend to measure the results of your communication to ensure stakeholders understand and are prepared to accept the message or that you are able to get what you need to make a decision or take the next step? Sometimes this dictates changing the message, the style or the frequency. It also enables you to follow up on concerns in the next communication. In other words take corrective action based on sound evaluation.

Good communication is not an after thought.