



How to Adapt a Communications Strategy around Change

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In a pop-out box:

Becher's Top 5 Tips for Communicating Change:

1. Plan, plan, plan
2. Define your key messages
3. Be open and honest, and communicate through all stages of the change
4. Don't fear your local media, work with them
5. Seek professional guidance and support if needed

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Change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be for the worst. While the consequences of poorly managed change can be dire, with a little planning and some good advice, major change can be used to create opportunity and enhance reputation.

However to communicate change effectively we need to first give some thought to the how and the why of communication. This involves an analysis of your change strategy and identifying those individuals and groups who are likely to have an interest in or to be directly affected by the change. It doesn't matter how well you plan the process of change, if you don't consider and plan for how to communicate, you are at risk of running into trouble. Strive to be clear about what exactly is changing and why – what are the reasons for the change and what is the likely outcome of the change?

Using a risk assessment approach is a good foundation for developing a communications strategy as it will not only help you to discover your strengths and weaknesses, but it will also highlight any worst-case situations. If your change is significant then the risks are high. By planning for the worst, nasty surprises can at least be mitigated.

A next step is to figure out who your stakeholders are. This process often reveals a list much longer than originally expected as you move beyond the obvious. Are they your ratepayers, the media, the State Government, your employees, your suppliers?

Once you have identified your stakeholders, it is important to clarify your messages so that they openly and transparently address your reasons for change.

As a foundation for the development of your messages, you might consider:

- highlighting the gains and benefits
- suitable responses to stakeholder uncertainties
- explaining how the advantages of change outweigh the disadvantages
- allowing feedback – the opportunity to share concerns, ask questions and to offer ideas
- keeping communication constant so there is sense that stakeholders are being kept in the loop.

Most people ignore much of the information they receive. But when they perceive a change to directly affect them they will be motivated to stop and listen. In most cases people are far more likely to believe what they hear on the street or over the fence than what they read in a brochure or an advertisement so it is important to consider the range of communication tools at your disposal. Simply relying on one communications tool is likely to be inadequate.

There are a number of tools to get your message across and it is best to use all the avenues you have available, like your employees, local media, or hosting an information seminar. In terms of articulating this, work to inform the most important group (usually employees) first to the least important group last.

In the case of local government, your employees are key communicators within your community, particularly in times of change. They will need to be informed early and accurately. It is essential that they are informed from the source rather than hearing about change from others in the street or reading about it on the front page of the newspaper.

If the change is significant then it is likely that the media will be interested. They often have an interest in communicating stories that are likely to impact at a grass roots level. Hiding away from the media is dishonest – so to avoid looking foolish, ensure that you have your communication strategy organised early on so there are no surprises. The media are a great resource for local government and often, an appropriate vehicle for getting your message across. A well written press release is only the first step, being prepared for an on-camera or radio interview is also necessary.

Communicating change to your stakeholders is more than an opportunity, it is a responsibility. Change efforts can fail due to underestimating the complexity of the change and failing to properly communicate. Change is more likely to succeed when stakeholders are treated with respect, are informed and when they know what is required to support the change. Communicating in a proactive way will not only keep everyone informed, but it will help make the process more comfortable for all concerned.