

How to get your message across: 7 rules for effective communication

Clear and effective communication is central to just about everything that we do. If we need people to work with us, respond to our requests or undertake essential actions, we must be sure that we communicate succinctly and clearly. The checklist, below, asks seven critical questions that should be answered *before* your message is sent!

THE MESSAGE SUCCESS RULES

[1.] WHY DO I NEED TO COMMUNICATE?

- Start at beginning (of course!) and, before you do anything else, ask yourself *why* you need to communicate, *now*.
- What is going on in the immediate workplace (your department, for example), or the wider sector that makes a communication initiative necessary?
- Just how important will your message appear to be to your audience, at the moment?
- Will people take notice? Why should they take notice?

[2.] WHAT IS YOUR MESSAGE?

- What is the heart of the subject or issue that you need to get across to your audience?
- What is it about, after any extraneous information has been pared away?
- What are you left with?
- What is the message *really* about?

[3.] HOW DOES THE MESSAGE FIT WITH CURRENT EVENTS?

- How does the issue or subject of your message fit in with the bigger picture?
- For example, what else is going on now that makes your message especially relevant?
- What is happening in the sector?
- What is going on in your institution?
- Are there policy, technological, economic or other issues on a broader scale that underpin or drive the issue you need to communicate?

- Understanding the broader perspective and the imperatives of timing for your communication will help you to plan how best to communicate (and when), within the context of everything else that might be going on. It will help you to explain to your audience the relative priority of your message.

[4.] WHAT IS THE PROFILE OF YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE?

- With which stakeholders do you need to communicate?
- What characteristics of their profile will determine how you communicate with them?
- To which type of language or terminology will they be most receptive?
- How might you tailor your message to reflect their interests or concerns?
- If you send out a generic message, it may be hard for your audience to make a personal connection with your issue or to recognise how the message might be of significance for them.

[5.] WHAT ARE THE KEY "POINTS OF IMPACT"?

- Where and how will the subject or issue within the message have an influence on the lives or work of your target audience?
- What practical difference will it make to them, now, or in the future?
- Knowing these factors will enable you to communicate accurately the potential impact or implications of the message content and ensure that audiences recognise the consequences for them.

[6.] WHAT DO YOU NEED PEOPLE TO DO?

- Exactly what do you need people to do in response to your message?
- It is critical to spell out exactly what actions are required on their behalf.
- It is equally important to make it very easy for people to respond or take action, so give clear instructions about what action is needed and provide appropriate contact details or web links.
- Remember, the harder it is for your audience to work out what to do next, the less likely it is that they will take any action.

[7.] WHAT'S THE HEADLINE?

- What will work as a headline for your message?
- Remember that any message (especially if it is an email) may have to grab a recipient's attention within just a few words.
- You need to capture their interest as early as possible, by making sure that the headline or title for your message includes words that distil the essence of the message as a "door opener" to the additional detail, provided within the message content.

Working through these questions will help you to plan a succinct and clear message which will help you to achieve the response that you need from your target audience.

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