Developing a Communications Plan

Why have a communications plan?

A communications plan is a set of strategies that identifies how you will communicate and consult with your project stakeholders. It can assist you to:
- set priorities;
- plan training sessions and information release;
- garner the support you need for the project; and
- identify the overlaps between project communications (and where you can possibly link efforts).

This plan should be a constant point of reference for consultation and communication to occur throughout the project. If it is overly complicated or detailed, or set at too high a level, it won't serve the purpose of being a day-to-day touchpoint with respect to all project communications.

If the communications plan is structured correctly, it should address the following questions:

1. Who will be doing the communicating?
2. Who is the target audience? Identify stakeholder groups.
3. What are the communications objectives?
4. When and how often should communications occur?
5. How will feedback be communicated?
6. What resources will be needed to ensure that communications occur to plan?

What does a communications plan look like?

Taking the basic questions [above] into account, the components of a communications plan vary according to need, however most will include:
- Project objectives
- Communication objectives
- Project contacts
- Resources allocated for communications
- Key stakeholders (identification and role in the project)
- Key messages (may be different for different project stages, or stakeholder groups)
- Communications strategies, channels and frequency

- Calendar of communications, often by stakeholder group, strategy or stage
- Details as to how feedback will be sought/collected/fed back to stakeholders
- How the effectiveness of communications will be measured

In terms of **who will be doing the communicating**, the person selected to facilitate or pass on messages should be a clear and open communicator, sufficiently knowledgeable, and be responsive to the audience. You may wish to involve more than one person in communications for ease of feedback and to ensure that nothing important is forgotten.

Identification of the target audience is usually through a formal stakeholder mapping exercise.

The following table can assist you to identify stakeholders according to their level of influence:

Five levels of engagement	Aims of communication & consultation
1. **Champions** Who can lead this forward?	Develop drivers. Cultivate buy-in and context. Gain support for overarching issues.
2. **Key stakeholders** What are the challenges, problems, opportunities?	Information gathering. Engagement.
3. **Problem-solvers** Who can help? What do they need to do? What are they currently planning? How do we resolve these needs?	Engagement. Conceptualising.
4. **Influencers** Who would cause us pain if they didn't support it? What are the sensitive issues?	Information gathering. Education. Awareness-raising. Risk management. Understanding other stakeholders' perspectives and needs.
5. **Interested parties**	Information. Awareness-raising.

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Communications objectives can include:

Communications objectives (for example)	Possible communications channels
Seeking buy-in from groups/individuals.	One-on-one meetings. Meetings involving senior champions or other experts. Tap into scheduled meetings (eg. JCC, SCC, Corporate Executive). Focus group sessions. Regular status updates. Impact assessments. Briefing notes.
Seeking decision/approval.	One-on-one meetings. Meetings involving senior champions or other experts. Tap into scheduled meetings. Briefing notes.
Seeking information or feedback.	One-on-one meetings. Tap into scheduled meetings. Focus group sessions. Teleconferences. Surveys. Consultation papers.
Establishing consensus or understanding in a group.	Project meetings. Committee meetings. Group briefings. Town hall briefings. Briefing notes.
Fostering engagement in an influential resister.	One-on-one meetings. Meetings involving other experts.
Education.	Town hall briefings. Training sessions.
Increasing awareness. Providing information or feedback.	Briefings from managers/experts. "Lunch & Learn" sessions. Formal briefing notes or submission papers. Newsletters. Update emails. *Ad hoc* emails at exception points. Internet or intranet articles. Media releases.

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Communications channels can be employed singly or in combination as a communications strategy.

Examples of possible **communications strategies** include:

- In attempting to source feedback on a specific policy or paper, it may be worthwhile to employ a number of communications channels in tandem – eg. circulate the paper, allow a week or two to digest hold a briefing, allow further time to digest/discuss.

- Consulting with representative groups (eg. focus group sessions) or establishing a committee, where the number of influential stakeholder is high.

- Releasing a regular status report or newsletter to keep all stakeholders informed to a minimum level of detail.

References and further information:

The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (2014) "Develop a Communications Plan" on *The Pell Institute and Pathways to College Network*. Available online via http://toolkit.pellinstitute.org [last accessed: 20 February 2014].

Mayhall, R. (undated) "How to Develop a Communications Plan" on *hieran.com*. Available online via http://hieran.com [last accessed: 20 February 2014].