Communicating with Volunteers and Staff

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One of the most important elements of the relationship that is formed between nonprofit organizations and their volunteers is communication. Research suggests that volunteers who feel more informed about the organization are more satisfied in their relationship with it. Organizations cannot underestimate the importance of keeping an open line of communication with their volunteers and staff. This chapter covers important processes of communication, the way that communication strengthens the relationship between a nonprofit and its volunteers and staff, and new trends and channels being used in the field.

Communication Process

Fundamentally, communication is the exchange of information between two or more entities. Nonprofit organizations communicate information to their volunteers and their staff about policies and procedures, current and future initiatives, and organizational goals. At the same time, staff and volunteers are required to send information back to the organization, often as a response to requests for information. Volunteers may keep a time sheet indicating how they have spent their time and submit this information to the organization. Staff may be required to report the status of current projects and initiatives to upper level management. All of these interactions are communications.

The process of communication has been studied for decades, and scholars have created models to represent how the process works (DeFleur, 1966; Schramm, 1954; Shannon, 1948; West & Turner, 2009). Early models of the communication included a sender (the entity that sends information), a message (the information being sent), a receiver (the entity receiving the information), and the effect or consequence of the communication (see Exhibit 12.1).
Over the years, the models have become more sophisticated, more accurately representing the complex nature of the communication, and the potential pitfalls that communicators face (Markowsky, 2011). For example, the model in Exhibit 12.2 takes into consideration how messages are transmitted, the impact of medium choice, the problem that noise or distraction creates, the decisions of audiences to respond in some way, and the credibility of the sender.

**Communication Model Applied to Internal Audiences**

Two important internal audiences for nonprofit organizations are staff and volunteers. Staff includes employees at all levels, including middle and upper management of the organization. Volunteers may work internally, holding staff positions, or they may work as contractors who are located outside of the organization structure but

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**EXHIBIT 12.1 Communication Model**

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**EXHIBIT 12.2 Communications Model Volunteer Management**

Adapted from DeFleur (1966), Schramm (1954), and Shannon & Weaver (1949)
provide important assistance and support for the organization. A modern definition of volunteerism includes “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause. Volunteering is part of a cluster of helping behaviors, entailing more commitment than spontaneous assistance but narrower in scope than the care provided to family and friends” (Wilson, 2000, p. 215). Frequently, volunteerism is associated with time donated to nonprofit organizations to further their mission. In the United States, nonprofits receive over 8 billion hours of volunteer time annually (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). This time is donated by 63 million citizens who give their time to 1.9 million nonprofit organizations (Internal Revenue Service, 2006). Building and maintaining a relationship with volunteers is critical to the success of nonprofit organizations.

As suggested in the communications model, the flow of conversation is two-way. Information flows from the sender to the receiver, and feedback is provided to the sender. In the same way, the communication within an organization must be two-way to be successful. Information from management in an organization to the staff and volunteers must take into consideration the feedback from the audiences and adjust to their needs. This will improve the credibility of management and lead to more effective communication within the organization.

Theories of Communication

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT A useful theory to consider when communicating with volunteers and staff is relationship management theory (Waters & Bortree, 2010) which comes from the public relations literature. This theory suggests that communication should be considered within the context of the relationship that is developed between an organization and its key audiences (Ki & Hon, 2007a,b), in this case volunteers and employees. Audiences judge the quality of the relationship that they have developed with their supervisor and upper level management along four dimensions: trust, control, commitment, satisfaction. The most important of these dimensions is trust. Employees and volunteers should feel that they can trust their supervisor and upper level management to make decisions that take into consideration the needs of staff and volunteers. They need to feel confident that the communication they receive from management is truthful and transparent, and they need to feel respect for the mission and behaviors of the organization within society. When trust is eroded, it leads to a poor quality relationship and often affects two other elements—commitment and satisfaction. Employees and volunteers that do not trust their organization often do not feel committed to it and do not feel satisfied with their positions. The fourth dimension is control, also called control mutuality. This dimension is the degree to which employees and volunteers feel that they have enough control over their own work and over the direction of the organization. Those who feel that they have less control than they need, due to overbearing supervisors or strict work guidelines, tend to feel less satisfied with their positions.

So how does communication fit into this theory? Communication is the key to the relationship. First, organization can build trust through their communication. When organizations are quick to respond to employee needs, when they listen to employee concerns and respond, and when they ensure that what they say is truthful and transparent, this leads to greater trust among volunteers and staff (Bortree,
2010). In addition, when nonprofit organizations communicate with external audiences in an honest and truthful way, this leads to greater admiration of the organization within society, and it creates more trust among internal audiences.

Second, organizations that show appreciation for their volunteers and staff through their communication, by thanking them for their work, or sharing with the staff the success of individual members, employees and volunteers tend to feel more satisfied and are more committed to the organization (Bortree, 2010).

Third, when a nonprofit organization offers guidance to volunteers and staff, this improves the quality of the relationship (Bortree, 2010). When a staff member or volunteer feels that they clearly understand what is expected of them in their position, they are more satisfied and committed to the organization.

**HIERARCHY OF EFFECTS**  Another important theory for communication is the Hierarchy of Effects (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). The next section of this chapter will explore the process of creating communication campaigns to raise awareness, change attitudes, and motivate behaviors of internal audiences. One theory that helps guide the planning of objectives for campaigns is the Hierarchy of Effects. This theory suggests that audiences tend to be persuaded through a series of steps. The three steps are: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. First, volunteers and staff must understand and be aware of an issue before they can develop an opinion about it. And, most often, the opinion one forms influences any behaviors around that issue. For example, if the organization is implementing a new policy on the role of volunteers within the organization, both volunteers and staff will not change their behaviors until they are aware of the policy. Once they are aware, they will decide how they feel about it. The organization hopes that they will have a positive opinion of the policy and will subsequently begin to follow the policy (behavior). If the organization finds that many volunteers are not following the policy, they must investigate the reason. Some volunteers may not be aware; others may not agree with the policy.

According to the theory, the easiest step to achieve is the first step—creating awareness. This is particularly true for internal audiences, since organizations often have established channels of communication with these groups. This is not to suggest that creating understanding is easy; rather, creating awareness or understanding is less difficult for an organization than changing individuals’ opinions or attitudes. Changing behavior is the most difficult of the three steps. In general, when communicators are setting objectives to create change within the organization, they can be the most aggressive in their planned outcomes of awareness or understanding. They should be more conservative in their projected opinion or attitude change among volunteers and staff, and they should be the most conservative when estimating the change in behavior that will result from communication campaigns.

**Communications Campaigns**

Some internal issues require sustained communication to inform and persuade staff and volunteers. For example, educating internal audiences about major management changes or persuading staff and volunteers to support a change in mission for the organization would require multiple communications through various channels over
a period of time. Coordinated communications efforts with a specific, finite purpose and clearly defined objectives are considered to be communications campaigns (Kendall, 1997). Planning and executing communications campaigns is a multi-step process that can effectively motivate and persuade internal audiences toward an organization’s goal (Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2008). Possible outcomes of campaigns with this audience would be improving morale, enhancing productivity, and creating team spirit.

A five-step process typically used to create and implement a communications campaign is ROPES (Hendrix & Hayes, 2010: Kelly, 2001). This stands for research, objectives, programming, evaluation, and stewardship.

Research

The first step in the process is research, which helps an organization identify the problem and find ways to best communicate to the target audiences of the campaign (Stacks, 2010). The research process begins by analyzing background material that will inform any new data gathering. Through background research, such as informal meetings and discussions with employees and management, reading organizational materials, or reviewing articles and studies on the issue, the organizations can begin to understand the issues as well as the opinions and behaviors of volunteers and staff. Armed with this information, a research team should identify the questions that they still need to answer about three key areas (Hendrix & Hayes, 2010):

- **The organization**
  
  To develop a successful campaign, a communicator must be thoroughly familiar with the organization that is conducting the communication. This means that before communication is crafted for internal audiences, the author of the communication must understand the structure of the organization, its history, its mission/philosophy/goals, other communication that the organization has disseminated to internal audiences, and the channels of communication that the organization currently has in place to reach internal audiences (meetings, newsletters, e-mail lists, blogs, etc.). All of this should inform the way the communication is created and disseminated to internal audiences.

- **Internal audiences**
  
  Volunteers and staff have different but overlapping needs. Both need to understand the expectations for their positions, and they wish to be included in communication channels and the decision-making process at the organization. Staff may be more invested in their positions, and they often have additional concerns, including benefits, raises, and job security, that may not affect volunteers. Individuals who volunteer for an organization are more likely to feel that their services are not as highly valued as employees, and they may be left out of decision-making meetings and processes more often than employees. Understanding how volunteers and staff feel about the campaign issue as well as how it affects them is critical to the success of the communication effort.

- **Key issue**
  
  Understanding the issue of the campaign is also vitally important. Whether the issue is employee morale or major changes within the organization,
Communicators need to thoroughly understand what the issue is and its implication for the organization. Understanding how it affects other audiences, such as organization members, clients, government officials, community, etc., will also help communicators make informed decisions about the type of information that should be delivered to internal audiences.

The most effective way to gather information about these three areas is through a systematic process of data collection through primary research methods, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, and participant observation. By directly interacting with volunteers and staff to assess their understanding, opinions, and current behavior, communicators will be better educated about the best ways to reach the audience, how to craft messages, and how to deliver information to the audiences.

Objectives

Once communicators have a thorough understanding of the organization, audience, and key issues of the campaign, they should be able to set objectives for the campaign. Setting objectives is one of the most important steps in the process. This clarifies the goals of the campaign and provides a focus for all communication and tactics (Wilcox, 2005).

Objectives of a campaign should be measurable, including the amount of change that is expected from the campaign and the timeline within which the goals will be reached. The objectives of a campaign toward volunteers and staff would indicate the amount of agreement that the organization hopes to get from these groups or the amount of change in behavior, information, or opinion that is expected. For example, if the goal is to increase the amount of productivity within the 40-hour work week, then an objective would indicate how the increase will be measured—through more hours worked, more clients served, more output of services, etc. In another example, if the overall goal of a campaign is to extend the commitment of volunteers for an additional period of time, then the rate of commitment and the period of time would both need to be clearly identified in the objective. The more precise the objective, the more likely it will be met.

Programming

Clear objectives will lead the way to programming, which is the tactical step in the campaign process. The best way to create tactics that effectively deliver a message to an audience is by first developing strategies that will lead to the objectives (Hendrix & Hayes, 2010).

Strategies are ways to channel efforts and resources toward the objectives. For example, let’s assume that an organization has undergone significant management changes, and organizational research has uncovered the fact that volunteers and staff fear the change will lead to positions being eliminated. To address this issue the organization may set an objective to reduce the fear among internal audiences that their positions will be eliminated. To reach this objective, communicators would need to consider strategies that allow effective contact with internal audiences to reassure volunteers and staff that the changes will not impact their positions. Potential
strategies would include using channels of communication such as face-to-face communication through meetings, social events, and other interpersonal communication to directly deliver a message to volunteers and staff. Another strategy would be to craft messages that, first, acknowledge the concerns of internal audiences and, second, directly communicate that positions are secure.

Once strategy has been set for a campaign, communicators can begin thinking about tactics within the context of the campaign. Tactics are specific tasks that support strategies and allow communicators to deliver messages to their audiences. Tactics fall into a number of categories, including the following:

- **Traditional communication.** Organizations may use digital or non-digital forms of communication to build and maintain their relationship with internal audiences. Traditional communication channels sometimes take a digital form, such as online newsletters and e-mail. In traditional communication, nonprofit organizations control the flow of communication which permits them to deliver well-crafted messages that address the needs and interest of their audience.

- **Internal publications.** The purpose of internal publications such as newsletters, magazines, bulletin boards, brochures, etc., is to educate volunteers and staff about the organization, its mission and goals, to improve the morale of employees and volunteers by featuring successes of individuals, and to provide useful information that helps the internal audience perform better in their positions. Effectively using this channel to reach audiences will improve the relationship between internal audiences and management, leading to better working environments.

- **Meetings.** Meetings are another effective way to communicate to audiences. This channel of communication provides two important elements of effective communication. First, it allows for face-to-face communication, which is the most powerful form of communication. Interpersonal communication has the most long-term consequences for communication audiences. Second, meetings allow for two-way dialogue. In order for management to be effective in its communication to staff and volunteers, it must understand the concerns and needs of the audiences. Engaging in two-way dialogue allows management to hear and respond to the concerns raised by volunteers and staff.

- **Events.** Like meetings, events offer management the opportunity to engage in two-way communication with volunteers and staff. In addition, events are a way to celebrate the successes of employees, volunteers, and the organization. Drawing attention to accomplishments of internal groups builds morale and creates a more positive atmosphere within the organization. Events are a good way of showing reciprocity and saying thank you to groups such as volunteers who are not economically rewarded for their work. Planning an event is time-consuming, resource-heavy activity. A few things to consider when planning an event are: 1) make sure you have enough staff to both plan and staff the event, 2) planning an event requires a high level of attention to detail, so be sure to consider all aspects of the event from invitations and speakers to food, seating, and guest safety, and 3) evaluate your events immediately. Make sure you count the number of attendees, talk to guests about
their experience, and make notes on any lessons learned during the event. You can use these lessons in future event planning.

- **Other channels.** There are many channels of communication that nonprofit organizations can use to communicate to their volunteers and staff, including phone trees, mail, and e-mail. One particularly effective communication channel is e-mail listservs which provide organizations with a means to reach many volunteers and staff with a single e-mail. However, listservs are only effective when they are accurate, so nonprofits should keep these lists up to date.

- **New media.** A more recent development in nonprofit communication is the use of new media channels to communicate with volunteers and staff. Organizations are beginning to use Web sites, discussion forums, and social media to deliver important information to these audiences (Waters & Bortree, 2010).

- **Internet.** Organization Web sites are an important source of information for volunteers and staff. The most effective sites are well organized, allowing audiences to easily find information. Topics should be presented in a thorough manner, and Web sites should include applications that allow for two-way communication such as discussion forum, comment sections, search functions, and feedback sections.

- **Blogs.** Organization Web sites have begun to incorporate blogs. Short for web log, blogs provide a format in which individuals can easily post information to a site. The posts may include video, photos, and links. Blogs can be an effective way for management to regularly communicate with internal audiences about successes of the company, new direction and changes, and important issues that impact the organization. Open and transparent communication by management through this medium could build a strong bond with volunteers and staff.

- **Facebook.** The most popular form of social networking is through the Facebook Web site. This site connects over 500 million people around the world. Nonprofits are beginning to establish profiles on this site that allow their employees and volunteers to connect to them and receive regular communication about the organization. This is also a good platform for volunteers and employees to network with one another and build closer relationships outside of the context of the organization.

- **Twitter.** Another popular site for social networking is Twitter, which is a form of microblogging (blogging in 140 characters). Microblogging, like blogging, allows the post author to share thoughts in brief form, but unlike other forms of blogging, pictures and videos cannot be uploaded to a Twitter post. However, most posts include a hyperlink that may lead to photos, Web sites, videos, or other media on the Internet. Twitter feeds work like RSS feeds, allowing users to read the posts of others. Organizations may set up profiles on Twitter and allow their volunteers and staff to connect to them. This too, is a good way to communicate with your audience. It also is a means for organizations to see what volunteers and staff are saying about them in this public forum.

- **YouTube and video communication.** Video is one of the most powerful forms of communication. A popular Web site for video sharing is YouTube, which claims that more than 2 billion videos are viewed on its site every day. Nonprofit organizations may set up profile pages on this site and share videos
that they create. While some internal communication may not be appropriate for a public forum such as YouTube, it can be a medium for promoting the benefits of working for the organization and sharing the successes of the organization.

Evaluation

The fourth step in the campaign-planning process is evaluation. This step allows the organization to gauge its success. Evaluation happens at many points in the process, not just at the end (Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2008). For example, let us assume that an organization is conducting a campaign to build the volunteer base by encouraging current volunteers to invite friends and family to volunteer as well. In this scenario, a campaign manager would want to assess the success of the campaign throughout and not wait until the end. If the campaign were scheduled to run for a six-month period, then the manager would want to assess its success every month by counting the number of new volunteers to the organization. Keeping an eye on trends and watching the trajectory of the campaign is critical throughout the life of the campaign. If the response to the campaign is poor, then more research may be needed to identify the problem. Is the message of the campaign clear? Are the right channels being used to communicate? Is there enough of an incentive to motivate volunteers to participate?

At the end of a campaign, an organization needs to carefully assess its success by first determining whether it reached the objectives of the campaign. This is the most important type of measurement. It is difficult to argue the success of a campaign that did not meet its objectives. However, other types of assessment should be done to better understand how the audiences understood and responded to the campaign message. Types of assessments to consider are level of awareness about the campaign and the key issues of the campaign, changes in attitudes, beliefs, opinions about the campaign issue or the organization, and any short-term behavioral changes related to the campaign. These can be assessed in a number of ways, including through anecdotal feedback, direct audience feedback, financial indicators, and a comparison of pre- and post-campaign knowledge, attitude or behavior.

Stewardship

After the campaign has officially ended, the organization needs to consider ongoing communication with audiences, including volunteers and staff (Waters & Bortree, 2010). Campaigns may be conducted to attract more volunteers or they may be used to educate current volunteers and staff of new policies. Either way, after a campaign has ended, the organization should continue to consider the needs of these groups within the organization. Stewardship is a type of relationship building, and it consists of four dimensions: reciprocity, responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing (Kelly, 2001).

- **Reciprocity.** To maintain a relationship with volunteers and staff, a nonprofit organization needs to acknowledge the contributions made by these groups. This could be done in the form of volunteer dinners, thank-you cards, awards, or gifts, to name a few.
Responsibility. Volunteers and staff are more responsive to organizations that act responsibly toward them and toward society. Organizations that keep their word and maintain high ethical standards are behaving responsibly.

Reporting. Keeping volunteers and staff abreast of important information will build the relationship that organizations maintain with these audiences. Disclosing financial information and communicating transparently are ways for a non-profit to report to their internal audiences.

Relationship nurturing. Nurturing the relationship through communication is critical to the success of the volunteer-organization relationship and the staff-organization relationship. Keeping these audiences up to date on interesting information about the organization, connecting with them through social media and new media, and providing regular meaningful interactions creates a positive environment for relationship development.

Potential Pitfalls of Internal Communication

Communication is a powerful tool to cultivate long-term meaningful relationships with volunteers and staff that can create satisfaction and long-term commitment to the organization. However there are many pitfalls that organizations should avoid when creating communications and conducting campaigns.

Lack of Audience Identification

Lack of communication is detrimental to organizations and can allow misunderstandings and rumors to flourish. Another faulty strategy is lack of targeted approach to communication. Unfortunately, many organizations that do not have sophisticated communication strategies tend to blast out communication to everyone without considering the audience. Communication that is appropriate and will resonate with volunteers may not be useful, and in some cases could create misunderstandings and frustration for staff. The most effective communication is crafted in the context of a clear understanding of the audience—their needs, their identity, their associations, their beliefs, etc.—and it delivers that communication through established channels that the audiences trust and rely upon.

Overreaching Expectations

Another potential pitfall of communication is expecting that communication alone is adequate to motivate behavior. While communication is powerful and sometimes it does lead to behavior, simply telling an audience what you want them to do does not ensure that they will act. When creating a communications plan, consider whether there are motivators in place that will lead volunteers and staff to take action.

Exclusionary Behaviors and Communication Strategies

Recent research in internal communication suggests that diverse audiences, including women and minorities, tend to feel less included in the communication from
organizations (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). Studies of this phenomenon in nonprofit communications have confirmed the same among diverse groups of volunteers including women, minorities, and youth (Mor-Barak, 2000, 2005). Lack of inclusion within the organization creates dissatisfaction among groups and could lead to early termination of volunteer and staff involvement. Organizations can avoid this issue through purposeful communication in the following areas.

- **Information networks.** Diverse audiences have raised concerns that they are not included in information networks. This means that they do not receive important information about the organization and their positions. Organizations can address this issue by ensuring that they engage in the following behaviors for diverse audiences: 1) openly share work-related information at the work group level, 2) have management directly engage with diverse audiences through face-to-face communication, 3) monitor social activities within the organization to be sure all groups are being invited and included.

- **Participation.** In addition, diverse audiences feel that they are less likely to be invited to participate in events and meetings related to the organization. They also feel concerned that they are less likely to be included in social gatherings. To address this, management should do the following: 1) be sure that diverse audiences are invited to meetings that relate to their departments and/or positions, 2) invite diverse audiences to actively participate in giving feedback to management during periods of evaluation, and 3) invite diverse audiences to meetings with higher-level management.

- **Decision making.** Finally, members of diverse groups have expressed that they feel left out of the decision-making process within their organizations. A few ways to ensure that this does not happen is 1) encourage the volunteer coordinator to give diverse groups more voice in deciding which tasks that will be assigned to them; 2) invite members of diverse groups to sit on committees that guide the direction of the organization; 3) encourage managers to solicit the opinions of members of diverse groups on important matters; and 4) be sure that the voices of diverse groups are heard in meeting.

### Conclusion

Communication can be a powerful tool for management of volunteers and staff. One important consideration when planning strategies and campaigns is the context of communication. For volunteers and staff, communication happens within the context of relationships with management and with other members of the organization. When communication is frequent, clear, meaningful, and transparent, it can be an important ingredient in a positive relationship between volunteers, staff, and management.

This chapter explored the process for sustained communication campaigns for volunteer and staff audiences. It suggested that research, strategy, and planning are key elements of a successful campaign. In addition, the chapter introduced a number of tactics that could be used to reach these audiences.

Informing, persuading, and motivating volunteers and staff toward organizational goals can be challenging; however, change is more easily achieved when an
organization maintains a positive relationship with these audiences through effective communication.

References


