

LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

STAGE 2: COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY (GROUP WORK – 1.5 HOURS)

Objective:

Understand the importance of developing a good communications strategy.

Introduction:

Communications is an essential function of a modern municipality. While traditionally, communications tended to operate in a top-down manner, communications in modern organisations also operates bottom-up and horizontally.

- ✓ Staff need to know what the leadership expects;
- ✓ The leadership needs to understand the reality of front-line services;
- ✓ Stakeholders need to know what the municipality is doing;
- ✓ The municipality needs to understand the interests and potential of stakeholders.

A modern municipality will ensure a professional approach to communications; the leadership will see it as a function of the municipality in which they must invest. Every municipality should therefore have its own Communications Strategy.

Assignment:

1. Read the document below 'A Communications Strategy for a Local Authority'. Ask each participant to complete the assessment exercise of their own municipality (see p. 15). Facilitate a discussion on the typical **strengths and weaknesses** of the current quality of municipal communications.
2. Divide into 3 groups. Ask each group to list (see pages 5-8):
 - The main **audiences** that a typical (one of their own) municipality might be seeking to reach.
 - The main **messages** that the municipality should be getting over to each of the audiences.
 - The main **communications vehicles** that the municipality might want to use.
 - The **obstacles** that would typically stand in the way of good communications and how they might be overcome.
3. Be prepared for a subsequent facilitated discussion.

A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR A LOCAL AUTHORITY¹

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a key function of the leadership and management of any institution, particularly a local authority where there are multiple audiences with different political perspectives and interests.

Efficient communication is not just giving out information; just as important is to encourage exchange and feedback. A local authority must inform all its stakeholders. But if it wants to develop its organisation and achieve high standards in service delivery, it must also listen and adapt itself in response.

*Good internal communications promotes a spirit of co-operation;
it is a symptom of good leadership.*

1. THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Good local government puts local authorities at the centre of a thousand communities. They have the power to make a real difference to peoples' lives.

Local authorities have many stakeholders; there are internal stakeholders – staff and elected representatives, and external stakeholders – local people, village associations, businesses, NGOs and other public sector bodies at the local level; the Local Government Association, Government and Party at national level. These relationships create opportunities and responsibilities for local authorities. The power of the relationships depends much on the quality of communications.

Local authorities need to know what is happening at national level and among other local authorities; they must be able to follow national policy development; they must be able to learn from best practice across the country. They also need to be extremely aware of what local people and organisations need and expect.

Each stakeholder needs to know about its local authority's successes, priorities, needs and expectations. Staff and elected representatives need to understand the organisation's strategic priorities and plans. Within any local authority, the leadership needs to understand the reality of working on the front line.

Staff will be more willing to give of their best if they know they are doing a good job in contributing to their local authority's strategic objectives.

¹ Drawn from the UNDP/CoE Toolkit: Towards a Modern Local Government Association

A. Internal communications

Good *internal communications* keeps staff and elected representatives informed. It contributes to their integration within the organisation and fosters a feeling of belonging, creates a healthy work environment and increases efficiency.

A good Communication Strategy establishes a dialogue within the local authority among its staff and elected representatives by:

- ***informing them of the key issues, achievements and challenges;***
- ***explaining priorities, projects and political positions;***
- ***gathering their reactions and comments on key issues to inform future action.***

B. External communications

External communications are vital, firstly to ensure all stakeholders remain committed to their local authority and are ready to support its initiatives, and secondly to align services with the real needs of stakeholders. Citizens, NGOs, local businesses, the media – all have an interest.

Real accountability requires good communications.

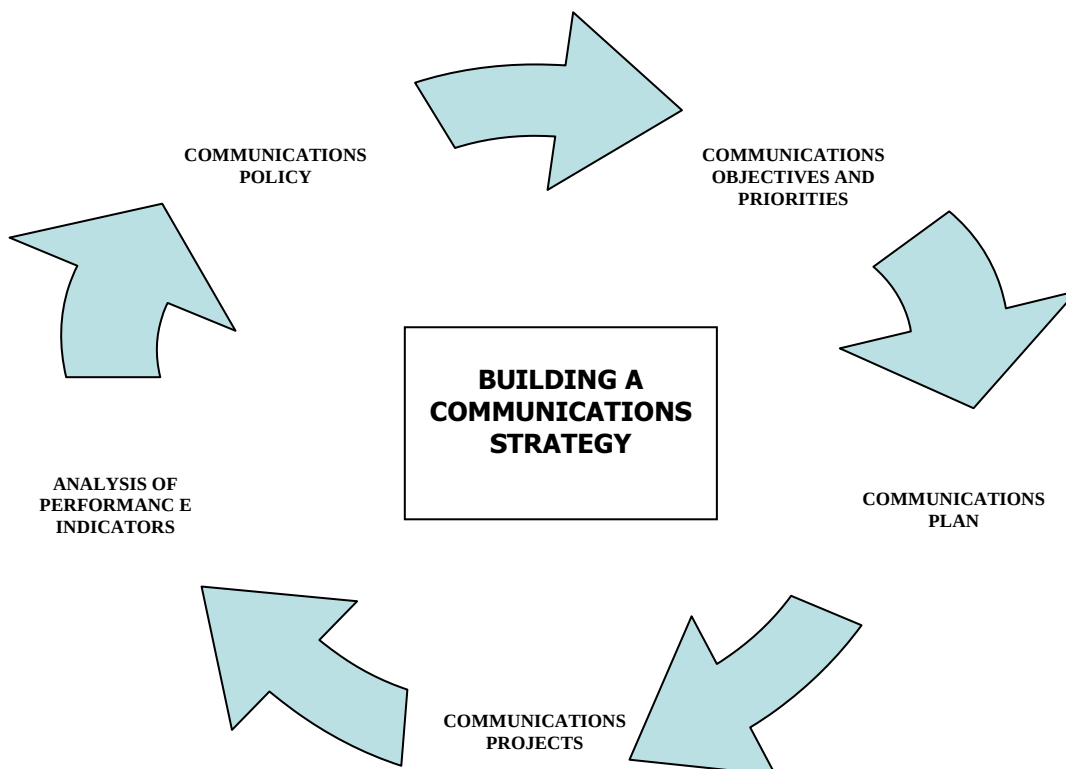
The value of good communications with external stakeholders can bring many benefits:

- ***service users can provide feedback on the kind of services they want and the quality of services they receive;***
- ***local businesses can help the local authority understand what the business community needs and how best to attract and develop investment and new businesses; they can contribute to local economic development strategies that seek to tackle poverty, reduce unemployment and develop entrepreneurial skills;***
- ***the media are interested in key policy issues that affect the local community; they can inform citizens of new policies and successful initiatives, and keep the local authority alert to what citizens are thinking;***
- ***citizens want to feel confident that their local authority is trying to do a good job; they can share their attitudes to key issues and proposed policies.***

What is a Communications Strategy?

An organisation must understand its 'communications environment'. It will define its communications policy and establish the objectives and priorities of its communications programme based on the vision, the mission and priorities of the organisation. It will set this out in a Communications Strategy.

The next step is the Communications Plan, which lists a series of specific short, medium and long-term projects allowing the organisation both to inform its stakeholders and to listen to them.



C. The Communications Strategy

A good *Communications Strategy* is an essential feature of a good local authority to ensure that the right messages get to the right audiences at the right time. It will need the full support of the local authority leadership. There are 4 critical success factors:

- 1. The leadership is convinced of the importance of communications.***
- 2. The leadership agrees that communications must be planned in a strategic way (just like any other managerial function) adopts a Communications Strategy and oversees its implementation.***

3. ***The leadership provides sufficient budget and resources, and supports a professional approach.***
4. ***The leadership insists on regular updates of the Communications Strategy, because the political and financial environment changes every year.***

2. UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNICATIONS ENVIRONMENT

The first task is to assess the state of communications in the organisation.

A. SPOKESPERSONS

Who are the people speaking on behalf of the local authority?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ <i>The President of the Assembly</i> □ <i>Senior elected representatives</i> □ <i>The Mayor</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ <i>Deputy Mayors</i> □ <i>The Communication Officer</i> □ <i>Particular senior staff</i> |
|---|--|

- A limited number of official spokespersons will avoid confusion in the messages. It might be the President of the Assembly and the Mayor, but others may be needed for specific occasions. Any spokesperson must have the necessary expertise and authority. Bad news should be conveyed by the leadership.
- Spokespersons must be well briefed before giving an interview or speaking in public, and should always provide feedback.
- Senior managers can provide factual information on the local authority's programmes, but should leave political comments to the political leadership.
- Each time elected representatives or staff express themselves, they represent the local authority; they convey a message, good or bad. The local authority leadership must be attentive to their feelings and communications skills.

B. MESSAGES

What are the main messages the local authority is currently trying to convey?

1. _____
2. _____

- The main messages should be aligned with the Strategic Plan; communications conveys the mission and the vision of the organisation and helps to harness commitment towards its goals and strategic priorities.

- If the local authority is promoting too many objectives at the same time, it will lose its focus; the audiences will also be confused by too many messages. You should establish your main communications objectives for the coming year, and stick to these messages.
- Messages can be transmitted very informally, like in a conversation; or in a very formal manner, for example in a conference or an advertisement.

C. AUDIENCES

<i>Who are the local authority's <u>audiences</u>?</i>	
<i><u>Internal audience</u></i> ▢ <i>Members of the Assembly</i> ▢ <i>Senior elected representatives</i> ▢ <i>Senior managers</i> ▢ <i>Staff</i>	<i><u>External audience</u></i> ▢ <i>Local state bodies</i> ▢ <i>Business community</i> ▢ <i>Local NGOs</i> ▢ <i>Journalists</i> ▢ <i>Citizens</i> ▢ <i>Community associations</i> ▢ <i>Parliamentarians</i>

Internally:

- Staff require in-depth information on local initiatives and political decisions. They will also have interesting suggestions to make.
- Staff like 'internal' news such as achievements and management issues.
- Senior managers require in-depth information on policy and technical issues; they want to know more about wider local government issues.
- Elected representatives need information on key issues and on the local authority's achievements.

Externally:

- The local authority should share its achievements and plans with all stakeholders; this may help them see the local authority as a reliable partner.
- The local authority should gather the views of stakeholders to help it respond appropriately to local needs and opportunities;
- The local authority should keep in touch with other municipalities to explore opportunities for inter-municipal cooperation;
- Information to the public should be simple and relevant;
- The local authority should consult local people and organisations on its priorities and respond to their views.

D. TOOLS

What tools are used by the local authority to transmit messages to the various audiences?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">□ <i>Logo</i>□ <i>Conversations in person</i>□ <i>Telephone calls</i>□ <i>Letters</i>□ <i>Business cards</i>□ <i>Emails</i>□ <i>Billboards</i>□ <i>Banners</i>□ <i>Meetings</i>□ <i>Seminars</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">□ <i>Conferences</i>□ <i>Government hearings</i>□ <i>Brochures</i>□ <i>Posters</i>□ <i>Magazines or bulletins</i>□ <i>News releases</i>□ <i>Paid advertisements</i>□ <i>Interviews</i>□ <i>Sponsored television or radio shows</i>□ <i>Circular, or membership letters</i> |
|---|---|

- Make sure in advance that a communications tool is appropriate and that it will reach the targeted audience. What is the audience's interest?
- Adapt the text to the target audience; write brochures in simple language.
- Plan the distribution of information material to reduce costs and time constraints.
- To reach the public-at-large, consider radio and newspaper advertisements.
- Seek sponsorship from a private sector company to cover part of the costs of the material in exchange for some visibility.

E. FEEDBACK

Good communications goes both ways; the local authority must both inform its audiences and listen to their views, giving them the option to reply, comment, protest, or ask for more information.

What tools are available for target audiences to transmit comments and questions to the local authority?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">□ <i>Telephone</i>□ <i>Directory of elected representatives</i>□ <i>Website</i>□ <i>Intranet</i>□ <i>Email</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">□ <i>In person at the local authority's offices</i>□ <i>In a suggestions box at the local authority's offices</i>□ <i>During discussions and question periods at the Assembly meetings</i>□ <i>Mail</i> |
|--|--|

- The only way the local authority can develop appropriate services and policies and achieve high standards is by listening to its stakeholders.
- All the information material should mention the local authority's address and phone number.
- A link to a Website and an email address are now expected from any serious organisation.

F. OBSTACLES

Even the best-planned communications can face obstacles, whether 'physical' obstacles (a bad telephone line, a lost letter, too much information) or 'emotional' obstacles (a personality conflict, cultural or linguistic differences).

What are the most obvious problems that can affect the local authority in its communications?

□ <i>Lack of communications between the elected representatives and staff</i> □ <i>Lack of communications among the staff themselves</i> □ <i>Infrequent meetings of the senior management team</i> □ <i>Lack of sufficient staff or funding to produce communications tools</i> □ <i>Lack of belief by the leadership in the importance of communications</i>	□ <i>Cultural or linguistic differences</i> □ <i>Political tensions between parties</i> □ <i>Lack of interest by the local authority in the population and vice versa</i> □ <i>Population scattered over a large area</i> □ <i>Lack of interest from journalists on local government topics</i> □ <i>Lack of understanding of the local authority's mission</i>
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- In areas with a low level of literacy, printed material should rely on illustrations, such as posters, photos, caricatures, etc.
- Both urban and rural sectors should be represented in the communications tools.
- Constant use of the logo helps to identify the local authority's own material.
- The leadership must understand that by informing its staff, stakeholders and elected representatives, it is empowering them; this can be very motivating.

3. WRITING THE COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

A communications policy brings together the local authority's principles, procedures and guidelines for communicating with internal and external audiences. It takes into account the assessment of the current communications environment. Above all, it must be aligned with the Strategic Plan.

The policy document should contain the following information:

a. Local authority context

- *Vision and mission of the local authority*
- *Positioning (or slogan) of the local authority*
- *Corporate values of the local authority*
- *Priorities of the local authority*

b. Responsibilities for communications

- *The official spokesperson on political issues.*
- *The title, position and name of the staff member responsible for communications.*
- *The communications responsibilities of each member of senior management.*

- *The part of the overall budget assigned to the communications sector.*

c. An analysis of the audiences

Who is in contact with the local authority? The local authority must be aware of its various audiences, in order to develop the right tools to communicate with them. What are their specific interests and characteristics?

d. A description of the local authority's communications practices

- *Description and detailed use of the logo.*
- *Designation process for the spokesperson (and substitute) to provide briefing for an important meeting, a press conference or an interview.*
- *Process for giving an interview to a journalist to give the official position.*
- *Approval process for communications projects. Who has the authority to sign off a publication or the organisation of an event? What authority is delegated to the Communications Officer? What is the involvement of senior management?*
- *Rules regarding selling advertisements, generating sponsorships and endorsing commercial enterprises.*
- *The process for managing 'Mandatory' communications projects, such as the Annual Report, Assembly meetings or an annual Citizen Survey?*

The communications policy should be consulted regularly, especially while preparing a new communications project. Each member of the Assembly and each member of staff should have a copy of the policy document. It should be updated when necessary.

4. ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

The local authority must set out the long- and medium-term communications objectives, and then think about the strategies that will achieve these objectives.

Example:

LONGER-TERM OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES (3 years)	
1. Establish the local authority as the community's representative	a) Inform all target audiences about its mission, functions and activities. b) Promote collaboration with partner organisations. c) Reinforce the brand (reputation, logo, image). d) Elaborate a punctual training programme for new elected representatives. e) Offer briefing sessions on the local authority to NGOs and businesses.

2. Raise the media's responsiveness to local government in order to establish a positive media coverage	f) Organise training events for journalists. g) Increase the number of articles and TV/radio shows featuring local government issues in a positive light. h) Start a campaign through paid advertisement in various media. i) Promote key members of the Assembly and senior management as experts available to comment on the news (good governance, service provision ...). j) Strengthen the communications skills of elected representatives and staff.
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SHORTER-TERM OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES (1 year)	
1. Develop two-way communications	a) Facilitate the exchange of best practice with other local authorities. b) Establish a network of contacts with other local authorities. c) Facilitate events that encourage personal contacts. d) Develop communications tools to promote the exchange of information. e) Use new technologies to facilitate the exchange of information.
2. Embed the local authority's corporate values in staff and elected representatives	f) Educate staff and elected representatives on the corporate values. g) Create a climate favourable to institutional change. h) Share information on local government with staff and elected representatives.

5. ELABORATING THE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

The *Communications Plan* is a series of tangible projects (events, publications, programmes) that will help the local authority reach its goals.

Arising from the communications objectives and strategies, the projects are aimed at the internal or external audiences; they can be sporadic or regular projects on a short, medium or long-term basis. The projects should also include feedback mechanisms, such as staff surveys.

The Communications Plan lists all the communications projects that the local authority will undertake in the coming year with the following information for each item:

- *Name, description, timescale and performance indicators of the project*
- *Person/sector responsible and budget*
- *Partners, if the project is developed in collaboration, and target audience*

The Communications Plan is a dynamic document that should be rewritten every year in the light of the budget and priorities. A Communications Plan can also be written for a specific project of major importance, like promoting a particular service.

6. A FEW COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS

There are many possible tools for communicating internally and externally: imagination and budget are the only elements limiting choice. However, it is extremely important to choose tools that are appropriate for the audience.

Some companies may agree to partially fund the local authority's communications projects, if they see a potential benefit for themselves regarding visibility, reputation and potential customers. These sponsors will usually ask that their logo appear on the publication or on the site of the event.

A. Printed material

A big, complex document using lots of colours on a glossy paper means higher printing costs. Contact a few printers and ask for ways to save on your budget.

Bulletin

Letters

Promotional items

Business cards

Press review

Brochure or guide

Calendar

Invitation

Map of the country

Annual report

***Directory of elected
representatives***

B. Audiovisual material and visual support

These items enhance the local authority's presence during a conference or seminar.

Transparencies / slides

Video

Posters and banner

C. Electronic communications

Before developing an electronic tool, the local authority must ensure that its staff and elected representatives will be able to use it. Many organisations invested a lot of time and money in a state-of-the-art Website when their main audiences did not have the equipment needed.

D. Events

Events provide significant opportunities for promoting the local authority:

Public assembly

Reception

'Open Doors' event

Reception

Training for staff and

Training seminar

elected representatives

Kiosk

E. Consultation tools

Never forget to listen to the audience. Feedback on the local authority's services is rarely given in a spontaneous manner, so it will often be necessary to provoke reactions from the audiences. The information received will be priceless.

Survey

Community meetings

***Email address of the
local authority***

Round tables

Suggestion box

Query or complaint

Reply coupon

F. **Media**

A comprehensive approach is the most effective, using a wide variety of media.

Paid advertisement

Regular column

News conference

News release

***Media relations is a complex part of the Communications Strategy,
yet it can become one of the local authority's most powerful tools.***

7. **DEALING WITH THE PRESS**

The local authority needs to establish good links with journalists covering local government issues.

A. Reactive media relations

At some point, journalists will want to know the local authority's position on various issues such as funding for NGOs or new legislation. The local authority must seize this opportunity to promote itself; it will gain credibility as an expert organisation.

- *Answer telephone calls or emails from reporters quickly with the appropriate information. If the journalist wants an interview, make the arrangements.*
- *Elected representatives and staff should know the right way to handle a media request.*
- *Make sure that the spokesperson has been briefed on issues likely to arise.*

B. Proactive media relations

Organisations with a good Communications Strategy **generate** media requests; they do not wait for them. The local authority should make regular efforts to feature in the newspapers and magazines, on the radio or on television.

- *Get to know the journalists who work on public affairs and politics.*

- *Connect what is happening in the news with local government issues to raise media interest.*

Better relations between the media and the local authority

Run an event to improve understanding between media and the local authority:

- *roundtable with reporters, elected representatives and officials;*
- *training sessions that are focused on what journalists want and how to interact with them;*
- *a fake press conference and a film of participants for training purposes;*
- *the distribution of a brochure on good media relations.*

- *Establish a think-tank of local government experts, offering comments on current topics.*
- *Be certain that any announcement, news release or press conference is truly 'news'. Find an interesting angle. If the local authority gets a reputation for sending boring information, the media will lose interest.*
- *Prepare news releases on 'success stories' for the media as features.*
- *Create 'photo-opportunities' in news conferences to illustrate the message.*
- *Send letters to local newspaper editors on local government issues, signed by the Assembly President or Mayor, in a timely manner.*
- *Offer the local authority's spokesperson for 'Open line' radio or television shows (where the public can call and ask questions on specific issues).*
- *Negotiate with local radios, television stations and newspapers to launch regular shows with personalities or articles on local government issues.*

C. Media relations in a time of crisis

Imagine a situation such as a conflict between the local authority and developers. A journalist learns about it. How should the local authority deal with the media?

If the local authority refuses to answer difficult questions or pretends that everything is "business as usual", the media and the public will feel that the local authority is hiding something. The way to deal with the media in a time of crisis is to be open and honest, respond quickly and to stay calm.

There are various ways to react to negative coverage in the media:

- *Offer the journalist involved an interview on the local authority's position.*
- *Send a letter to the newspaper, clarifying the local authority's position.*
- *If a lot of media are asking for an interview, organise a press conference.*

- *Understand both sides; there are always two sides to a story.*
- *Never reply "No comment" when a reporter asks a question.*
- *The local authority leadership must be actively looking for solutions during a time of crisis! The messages are only as good as the actions.*
- *A good communicator can always turn negative coverage into a positive story. Try to find the angle that will feature the local authority strong point.*

KEY MESSAGES

- **Good internal communications ensure that staff know the priorities of the leadership and that managers know the needs of staff.**
- **External communications generates understanding and support for the local authority's goals.**
- **There is a clear link between the quality of communications and the effectiveness of the organisation.**
- **A Communications Strategy gets the right message to the right people at the right time, using the appropriate spokespersons and a range of communications vehicles.**
- **Communications is as much about listening as about telling, particularly for the organisation.**
- **In a professional world, communications must be professionally managed.**
- **Without a good Communications Strategy, the local authority will be a weak advocate of its policies.**
- **Be pro-active; better to have the media involved than to be ignored.**

8. SELF-ASSESSMENT: SUCCESS FACTORS IN COMMUNICATIONS

Consider the success factors set out in the table below; assess how good your local authority is at communications. Where there is room for improvement, list actions to be taken.

SUCCESS FACTORS IN COMMUNICATIONS	HOW WELL DOES YOUR LOCAL AUTHORITY ACHIEVE THEM?	ACTION
➤ The local authority gives importance to internal and external communications. ➤ All staff and elected representatives are committed to, and trained in, good communications. ➤ Staff and elected representatives feel they are well informed about the work of the local authority. ➤ Stakeholders feel they are well informed about the work of the local authority. ➤ The local authority's communications policies and plans are realistic. ➤ There is a well-resourced, up-to-date Communications Strategy that is used to direct the local authority's communications. ➤ It is clear who speaks on behalf of the local authority officially, what the main messages are, and who the key audiences are. ➤ The local authority uses a wide range of communications tools effectively. ➤ The local authority is good at listening and getting feedback. ➤ The local authority works well with the media.		