INTERNAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

PURPOSES & BENEFITS

Internal communication can, for better and for worse, greatly impact how a group works together. This tool helps a group to consider and develop strategies to optimize internal communication within the group.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

The collaborative group can use this tool to help:

- Understand common internal strategic communication problems and effective internal communication strategies.
- Promote a discussion among group members to diagnose and find strategic solutions to their internal communication challenges if and when they arise.

Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence

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Communication breakdowns within a group can be a common and unfortunate reality for a collaborative group. Internal strategic communication is a key component to how a group works together and meets their goals – when it's good, it can pave the way for great success, and it can create significant barriers to success when there are problems, especially if they are not addressed. Understanding common internal communication problems and solutions can help a group to identify and address challenges in a timely and effective manner. If and when internal communication challenges arise, the group can even consider adding identified solutions to internal strategic communication problems to their guiding principles, which outline how the group agrees to work together *(For more information, see "Developing Guiding Principles" in Step 1C – Setting Your Collaborative Group Up for Success: Tools for Determining How You'll Work Together" of the toolkit.)*

Much emphasis is placed on external communications:

- *Are you reaching your constituents?*
- *Are you effectively conveying the message you want to convey?*
- *Are you affecting change through your message?*
- *Are you targeting your communications in the community to encourage partnerships?*

While these external communications are critical, it is also equally important to communicate effectively with those involved in your collaborative partnership.

The left column of the table below lists common problems that can arise and impede internal communication, preventing it from happening efficiently and effectively. Additionally, understanding and using specific, effective internal communication strategies, listed in the right column of the table below, can help a group to prevent altogether or minimize any pitfalls experienced. If and when communication challenges arise, these strategies may help to identify resolution.

Use the following strategies to avoid some of the common pitfalls that inhibit effective communication:

COMMON INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS:	STRATEGY(IES) FOR EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION:
People assume the knowledge they have is the knowledge everyone has. In reality, people are not usually aware of information unless it is shared deliberately.	• **Share information appropriately** – Sometimes it is difficult to remember to include other individuals in plans and details. However, some individuals who have peripheral involvement may have valuable feedback to offer if they are given the opportunity to participate in a discussion, meeting, or e-mail thread. • **Provide updates to all stakeholders** – When working in a collaborative partnership, it is important to provide updates to all stakeholders, alerting them of changes, new developments, or providing on-going status reports. When all stakeholders receive the same message, the likelihood of that message being confused is lessened.
A dislike of bureaucracy can sometimes mean that **internal communications become too streamlined.** Fewer memos are written to cut down on paperwork. As a result, some messages are not shared at all.	• **Share information appropriately** – Sometimes it is difficult to remember to include other individuals in plans and details. However, some individuals who have peripheral involvement may have valuable feedback to offer if they are given the opportunity to participate in a discussion, meeting, or e-mail thread. • **Provide updates to all stakeholders** – When working in a collaborative partnership, it is important to provide updates to all stakeholders, alerting them of changes, new developments, or providing on-going status reports. When all stakeholders receive the same message, the likelihood of that message being confused is lessened.

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Communicating too frequently can mean that the message is lost or not given appropriate notice. After receiving 20 e-mails on the same subject, a recipient may decide to skim the text or avoid reading it all together.	• **Keep messages simple** – When writing e-mails, memos, or other communications, keep the intended message clear and concise. Keep in mind that the average attention span for a written e-mail message is less than 50 words. That means the main points of your message need to happen at the top of the e-mail or memo. • **Use e-mail subject lines effectively** – The subject line of an e-mail is the first way your message is conveyed. Title subject lines appropriately and flag e-mails as high or low importance accordingly so the recipient knows if a response is expected quickly.
Different people interpret messages differently, causing confusion and possibly the dissemination of misinformation as the message moves from person to person.	• **Provide updates to all stakeholders** – When working in a collaborative partnership, it is important to provide updates to all stakeholders, alerting them of changes, new developments, or providing on-going status reports. When all stakeholders receive the same message, the likelihood of that message being confused is lessened. • **Address rumors** – Addressing rumors when they arise is important to keeping communication clear among a group. If rumors are not addressed quickly, misinformation can spread, leading to confusion and frustration.
Stress can sometimes mean that only critical information is shared. This may avoid a crisis at the present, but could lead to a bigger crisis in the future.	• **Share information appropriately** – Sometimes it is difficult to remember to include other individuals in plans and details. However, some individuals who have peripheral involvement may have valuable feedback to offer if they are given the opportunity to participate in a discussion, meeting, or e-mail thread. • **Provide updates to all stakeholders** – When working in a collaborative partnership, it is important to provide updates to all stakeholders, alerting them of changes, new developments, or providing on-going status reports. When all stakeholders receive the same message, the likelihood of that message being confused is lessened.
Taking an attitude of **solving problems rather than proactively working toward understanding** can also leave individuals in crisis mode, creating more stress.	• Take a more proactive, preventative approach to internal communication by **incorporating the strategies for effective internal communication** listed in the column of this table **into the collaborative group's guiding principles**, since they describe how the group will work together.
Sometimes **the real message of a communication can be lost in an influx of data**.	• **Keep messages simple** – When writing e-mails, memos, or other communications, keep the intended message clear and concise. Keep in mind that the average attention span for a written e-mail message is less than 50 words. That means the main points of your message need to happen at the top of the e-mail or memo. • **Use e-mail subject lines effectively** – The subject line of an e-mail is the first way your message is conveyed. Title subject lines appropriately and flag e-mails as high or low importance accordingly so the recipient knows if a response is expected quickly.
Information is given on a need-to-know basis. Individuals may make a personal decision that others do not need to know certain information. The risk with this approach is that someone who might not be viewed as a "need-to-know" individual may have helpful feedback or may actually have a stake in the information and was not given consideration.	• **Share information appropriately** – Sometimes it is difficult to remember to include other individuals in plans and details. However, some individuals who have peripheral involvement may have valuable feedback to offer if they are given the opportunity to participate in a discussion, meeting, or e-mail thread. • **Provide updates to all stakeholders** – When working in a collaborative partnership, it is important to provide updates to all stakeholders, alerting them of changes, new developments, or providing on-going status reports. When all stakeholders receive the same message, the likelihood of that message being confused is lessened.
Professionals in a particular field might **use jargon that is not easily understood among others.** In fact, some jargon might mean one thing to one group of people and something else to another.	• **Use jargon appropriately** – If any jargon must be used, make sure the precise meaning of that jargon is clear to the recipients of the message.

When **meetings end without clarifying who is responsible for what and without setting deadlines**, those involved can become frustrated and confused. A lack of clear agreement on who will do what and by when can lead to additional e-mails, phone calls, and communications, which can create even more confusion.	• **Designate a recorder at meetings** – At meetings, make sure to have a designated recorder responsible for writing down agreements and other notes. • **Begin and end meetings on time** – While this is a courtesy to individuals with busy schedules, beginning and ending meetings on time is also a way to focus messages being delivered during meetings. Having a time limit is an encouragement to those delivering messages to do so clearly and concisely to make the most of meeting time. • **Make agreements** – It is helpful to make agreements during meetings as to who will do what and by when. The recorder can read back these agreements at the end of a meeting and verify that those who have made agreements understand the tasks to which they have committed themselves. These notes should be distributed on paper to all group members so that everyone has an accurate record of events and to ensure that everyone receives the same message. • **Next steps** – Meetings should end with next steps. These next steps are usually tied to the agreements made at meetings. The value of next steps is that they keep the group thinking logically about the tasks that need to happen in order to reach a goal. • **Revisit agreements** – During meetings, be sure to revisit agreements made at previous meetings. The group can even make this a standing first agenda item at every meeting to ensure consistency in reviewing progress between meetings. Making regular status checks on agreed-upon tasks and next steps is an important step to keeping everyone involved up-to-date. • **Use the "Meeting Agenda & Notes" tool** in Step 1C – Setting Your Collaborative Group Up for Success: Tools for Determining How You'll Work Together" of the toolkit **as a method for tracking who will do what by when** so that everyone is on the same page, and, because these agreements are tracked, forward progress can clearly be demonstrated and even recorded right on the agenda! *(For more information, see "Developing Guiding Principles" in Step 1C – Setting Your Collaborative Group Up for Success: Tools for Determining How You'll Work Together" of the toolkit.)*