Creating a Health Service Integration Communication Plan

Description:

This tool provides an overview of how to develop a communications plan, describes the key components and steps in creating a communication plan and provides a template.

How it can be used:

Your communication plan describes how you share information on your health service integration initiative and explains what information is shared with whom, when and why. It ensures that the right information on your initiative is communicated to the right people at the right time in the right way. Whether you need to communicate day-to-day updates on your health service integration or "big news" about major changes in your organization, the best communications start with good planning.

Use this tool to help you carefully consider all the people or groups that require communication about your health service integration initiative, and plan for the types of information that would be most valuable.

What is a communication plan and why do you need one?

Communication can take many forms; however, all communications need to serve a purpose. To communicate effectively, it helps to plan out what you want from your communication.

You may be saying "We are already so busy. We have a newsletter and it's already getting the message out. Why is it important to focus on communication planning?"

Because, your communication plan creates a structure that helps you reach your communication goals. Even the *process* of creating a communication plan is valuable.

The benefits of creating a communication plan include:

- guiding your communication activities;
- describing where you want to be and helping you engage with the right audience to get there;
- making communication efforts more efficient and effective;
- maximizing valuable resources and ensuring that you are laser-focused in your efforts;
- assessing your activities to see whether you are reaching your communication goals.

In short, communication planning is a straightforward, step-by-step roadmap that will help you identify who to reach (your audiences), clearly and logically plan what you want to say (your key messages) and determine the best way to deliver your message (channel).

Creating a communication plan

To begin, consider some basic questions:

- Why do you want to communicate? (What's your purpose or objective?)
- Whom do you want to communicate it to? (Who is your audience?)
- What do you want to communicate? (What is your message?)
- How do you want to communicate it? (What communication channels will you use?)
- How will you know it is working? (How will you evaluate your communication plan?)

Clarify your objectives

What you want to communicate depends on what you're trying to accomplish with your communication plan. For your health service integration initiative, you might be concerned with one or a combination of the following:

- Explaining or promoting your health integration initiative;
- Recruiting participants or volunteers;
- Rallying supporters;
- Announcing events;
- Clarifying misinformation;
- Celebrating successes.

Objectives specify exactly what needs to be achieved by your communication plan. The key to developing objectives is that they are SMART:

- **S**pecific – The objective is clear about what you are going to do and exactly how are you going to do it. Questions to ask include: "what are we going to do? Who is going to do it?
- **M**easurable – You should be able to measure the objective (e.g., the number of people attending presentations, the number of people signing up for information sessions, etc.).
- **A**chievable – The objective is achievable given the current health system environment.
- **R**ealistic – The objectives can be achieved using the time and the resources available.
- **T**ime-bound – The objective is clear as to how much time it will take to achieve.

Identify your target audience(s)

Who are you trying to reach? Knowing your target audience makes it possible to logically plan your communication. You'll need different messages for different groups. A good way to do this is to think about the audience's needs – what do they need to know from you? For example, what you communicate to your community about your health service integration initiative is different than what you communicate to your funders. Both are examples of target audiences. List the objectives (there may be several) for each audience in your plan.

Consider whether your target audience has any special needs; for example, low literacy rates, limited access to media, or disabilities that may prevent them from receiving your message.

Choose your key messages

Once you have clarified your objectives and understand your audiences, it's time to plan the actual messages. Key messages are important because they help everyone focus on exactly what is being communicated, reducing the possibility of mixed messages. Craft your message with your audiences in mind and link the communication objectives to audience needs.

Consider how you communicate. If your message is too informal, your audience might feel you're talking down to them; too formal and you distance your audience. Use straightforward language that expresses simply and clearly what you want to say.

Identify the channels you will use

Before starting on the details of your plan, think about the possible communications channels you could use to reach your target audiences. You probably already use many ways to communicate in your community Here are some ideas:

- Email
- Newsletter/brochures
- Teleconference
- Notice boards
- Leadership briefing
- Radio programs
- Posters
- Community fairs and event

What do your intended audiences read, listen to, watch, and engage in? You have to reach them by placing your message where they'll see it.

Implement the plan

Now put it all together into a plan. Set out tasks to be done, their timelines, and who will be responsible for them. This will help keep everyone on track. Conduct regular (weekly, monthly, or quarterly) check-ins to assess your progress. Keep good notes on any revisions or adjustments that have been made (or should be made) so you can incorporate this information into your evaluation process and in any further initiative's communication planning.

Evaluate the plan

This is where you determine whether or not you were successful in reaching your communication objectives. Remember, that's why you're communicating… to achieve your health integration initiative goals. Don't communicate just for the sake of communicating. No one needs another unnecessary newsletter.

Communication Plan Template

Communication Plan for				
Communication Objectives		**1.**	**2.**	**3.**
Audience(s)	**Key Message(s)**	**Channel(s)**	**Time**	**Person or Group Responsible**