Systems Approach Workbook

Communications Tools: **Developing a Communications Plan**

Why a Communications Plan?

Improving the quality, accessibility and range of services and supports for substance use in your jurisdiction using the Systems Approach framework depends on being able to engage your staff, decision makers and stakeholders in the process. As a result, communicating with these audiences should be a cornerstone of your preparation, implementation and maintenance activities. Communication is a key component of an effective change management approach, which, in turn, is vital to ensuring effective and sustainable system improvements.

As a start, you'll want to develop a communications plan to help guide your efforts and to illustrate the importance of any changes being considered or implemented.

> *The development of the communications plan itself will serve as a way to align your staff behind common goals and messages.*

When developing a communications plan for the introduction of a new concept or project, it is important to perform the following tasks:

- **Define your audiences:** Who needs to be engaged or know about the project?

- **Set communications objectives:** What are you trying to accomplish and how will communications help you do this?

- **Develop key messages:** What are the key things you want to communicate consistently?

- **Identify required communications products, activities and tools:** What will you need to develop to help you meet your objectives?

- **Measure and monitor your activities:** How successful have we been in communicating?

> *Consistency, transparency and timeliness of information are key factors in developing trust.*

The following pages present sections found in a typical communications plan. Each section begins with a description of what it should contain. We've provided a few examples of the elements you may want to consider including in your own plan. Feel free to refer to the other resource materials to help you create your plan and communications activities.

Audiences

In this section, outline your audiences and provide a description of each. You might need a detailed breakdown for external audiences and stakeholders.

Your audiences are the people who need to be engaged and be kept apprised of the activities you are undertaking. Typical audiences for this type of project are:

- **Internal** (e.g., relevant and affected staff, senior leadership, board members, volunteers, contract workers, associates, etc.); and
- **External** (e.g., potential partners, decision makers, sponsors and supporters, media, etc.).

Communications Objectives

In this section, you should outline the objectives you are trying to achieve through communications. You should align your communication objectives with your business or operational objectives.

If you are in the beginning stages of setting up the Systems Approach in your jurisdiction, you'll want to first develop communications objectives that help your stakeholders (e.g., staff, decision makers, external stakeholders, etc.) achieve a general understanding of the guiding concepts behind the Systems Approach.

> *Create communication channels and vehicles that provide timely, accurate and consistent information designed to improve comprehension and promote healthy dialogue about the project.*

You will also want to focus on developing communication mechanisms that ensure information moves bottom up, top down, and horizontally across and outside the organization. Communication is a two-way activity. The mechanisms you put in place should encourage feedback and input.

The following goals are examples of communications objectives:

- Ensure all leadership or management teams share a common understanding of the Systems Approach, its guiding concepts and the reasons for system change, one month before the project launch date.
- Develop key messages to ensure consistent information is provided to staff, senior decision makers and stakeholders.
- Engage stakeholders in the development of a systems-based approach by developing communication mechanisms that promote dialogue and ensure consistent information flow.

Key Messages

In this section, you will create a series of key messages that will be used to ensure consistency across all communications. (See Sample Key Messages for examples.)

> *Mixed or inconsistent messages can result in confusion amongst staff and in loss of management confidence.*

Developing a series of key messages will help ensure that all persons asked to speak on behalf of the project tell the same story. It will also help align messages in all your communications products. Your key messages will change and evolve as the project moves from planning to implementation. Therefore, it is important that someone is tasked with overseeing the messages associated with the project.

Your key messages must be aligned with and support the operational messages that have been developed as part of the implementation phase: the shared vision, values, principles and guiding concepts.

Initially, your key messages should address the following information requirements:

- The reason for the approach (i.e., the rationale for change at the national and local level);
- The importance of using a change management approach to ensure the new project, direction or activity is implemented effectively, efficiently and sustainably;
- The benefits of the Systems Approach and the goals it is being used to achieve;
- Preliminary information on the steps being taken to implement the approach;
- Who is involved and who is in charge;
- Anticipated timelines and resource impacts associated with the project; and
- Next steps.

As you move to the implementation phase, you will want to develop messages that address the following requirements:

- Describe the appeal of the Systems Approach for external stakeholders;
- Outline and recognize the key players involved in the implementation;
- Demonstrate the benefits resulting from working together to comprehensively address substance use and related issues; and
- Focus on successes and provide recognition, especially for senior management.

> *Strengths-based messaging promotes engagement, enthusiasm and support across all audiences.*

Products, Activities and Tools

In this section, you will outline the products, activities and tools that will be used to help you achieve your communication objectives. We recommend developing a table that lists the products, audiences, budget and timelines for development.

Your products and activities should be planned based on your objectives and audiences. For example, if the goal is to ensure understanding of the Systems Approach, you will want to develop tools that provide information about it and are in a format or use specific language that your audiences will understand.

A number of communications products already exist to help you communicate the Systems Approach to your audiences. These resources include:

- Systems Approach Workbook (available at www.nts-snt.ca)
- Sample Key Messages
- Sample PowerPoint introducing the Systems Approach
- Sample Briefing Note introducing the Systems Approach

Products that you can develop to communicate the Systems Approach include:

- **Page on your website:** This page should, at a minimum, include key messages about the vision for your region, links to supporting and relevant documentation (e.g., regional strategies, the National Treatment Strategy, etc.), partner and sponsor recognition, if applicable, contact information, and key links, such as www.nts-snt.ca as well as partner and supporter websites.
- **Backgrounder:** This document should describe how you arrived at this stage, why a change is being made, why this approach was chosen, who is involved, key benefits and next steps.
- **Presentation deck:** See the Sample PowerPoint presentation; this can be customized to your region. It should include information about the background, the approach, implementation activities for your region and next steps.
- **Tombstone or boilerplate statement:** This single paragraph succinctly describes the genesis of the approach, your vision, who is involved and next steps. It usually includes a link to a web page for more information. It should be consistently used in newsletters and any other communication vehicles in your communications toolbox.

Internal Communication Tools

Tools and activities to engage and share information with staff and decision makers:

- Implementation or liaison team to consult with employees and help manage the change;
- Intranet page;
- Town hall meetings;
- Videos and testimonials;

- Staff and departmental meetings and surveys;

- Internal newsletter;

- Lunchroom or mailroom bulletin board; and

- Notices attached to pay stubs.

> *An implementation or other liaison team is an ideal communications tool because it functions as a direct contact point between staff members and leadership.*

External Communication Tools

Tools and activities to engage and share information with external stakeholders:

- Identify relevant committees or groups and ask if you can give a presentation at one of their meetings (use your PowerPoint presentation);

- External organizational newsletter;

- Web page that features video, testimonials and endorsements;

- Participation at local events or conferences;

- Webinars on the Systems Approach; and

- Link to your web page through your organization's social media channels.

Sample Communications Workplan

PRODUCT	AUDIENCES	TIMELINES	BUDGET
Web page	External stakeholders	Mar 15	TBC
Backgrounder	Senior management External stakeholders	Mar 15	TBC

Evaluation and Monitoring

In this section, you will include the activities, tools and metrics that will be used to evaluate and monitor your communications efforts.

As with all activities, it is important to put in place evaluation and monitoring activities to measure the success of your efforts. Ways to measure the success of a communication effort include:

- Hits to your web page or relevant intranet site;

- Number of people requesting information on the Systems Approach;

- Number of "shares" and social media monitoring;

- Surveys or polling of staff or stakeholders to determine level of comprehension and awareness of change activities;

- Level of interest expressed by external stakeholders;

- Media hits and requests for information and interviews; and

- Tone of coverage in social media and traditional media.