

Strengthening Purposeful Dialogue:



A Handbook of Guiding Principles, Protocols, and Strategies

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By

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What Is Purposeful Dialogue & How Do We Use It at COM-FSM?

“Every institutional decision has a communications aspect to it. There are no exceptions to this rule, and institutions that ignore the rule are likely to fail.”
(Varley)

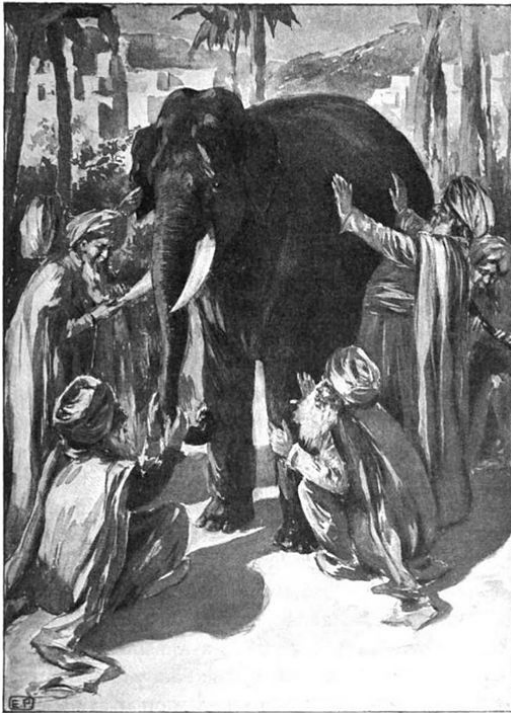
The quotation above points to just how important effective communications can be for any institution. For a number of years, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) used the phrase “purposeful dialogue” in its Recommendation One to identify a weakness in communications at the college. The college’s reflection on that issue resulted in adoption of a new *COM-FSM Communications Policy* in 2013—a policy that stipulated a number tasks and deadlines. The Communications Policy Working Group (CWPG) was formed in the summer of 2013 to address the tasks that were scheduled to be completed in 2014. One of the group’s first tasks was to reach consensus on what it meant by the phrase “purposeful dialogue.” The CPWG undertook an exercise in creating a formal definition with the following result.

COM-FSM Definition of Purposeful Dialogue

- Purposeful dialogue is a model of institutional communication characterized by the following:
 - genuinely participatory,
 - multi-directional and ongoing,
 - professional in tone,
 - centered on use of evidence
 - and focused on achieving published mission and goals.

—Submitted to the Executive Committee
08/17/2013 then endorsed by electronic vote.

The CWPG drew on stories offered by its members—as well as feedback from campus groups at National Campus, Pohnpei Campus and Chuuk Campus—to help flesh out the dimensions of this definition at the college. These stories were then edited to provide good illustrations of common communication issues. This resulting document presents nine guiding principles for strengthening purposeful dialogue, along with protocols and strategies for adhering to those principles. Perhaps the very old story that follows can illustrate some of the special problems involved when applying those guiding principles at an institution of higher education. The ancient fable of “Six Blind Men and the Elephant” appears in various versions across Asia and the East. The story was recast in the poem below, and it reminds us how difficult it can be to communicate when even six individuals “to learning much inclined” will bring very different perceptions to the same situation.



Six Blind Men and the Elephant. Public domain image retrieved 10/13/13 from https://www.google.com/search?q=Public+domain+Image+of+6+blind+men+and+the+elephant&client=firefox-a&hs=rjm&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=bGpUrPODI2QkAfQkYCIAQ&ved=0CC4QsAQ&biw=1366&bih=664#facrc=&imgdii=&imgcr=0/C2GWKvUaOnaM%3A%3BfmZZpPNPtSBgrM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.computerweekly.com%252Fblogs%252Fpublic-sector%252F2011%252F03%252F16%252FThe%2520Blind%252520Men%252520and%252520the%252520Elephant.png%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.computerweekly.com%252Fcgi-bin%252Fmt-search.cgi%253Fblog_id%253D102%2526tag%253Dfree%252520software%2526limit%253D20%3B435%3B600

(Anonymous)

The Blind Men and the Elephant
John Godfrey Saxe
 (1816-1887)

*It was six men of Indostan
 To learning much inclined,
 Who went to see the Elephant
 (Though all of them were blind)
 That each by observation
 Might satisfy his mind.*

*The First approached the Elephant,
 And happening to fall
 Against his broad and sturdy side,
 At once began to bawl
 "God bless me! But the Elephant
 Is very like a WALL!"*

*The Second, feeling of the tusk,
 Cried, "Ho, what have we here,
 So very round and smooth and sharp?*

*To me 'tis mighty clear
 This wonder of an Elephant
 Is very like a SPEAR!"*

*The Third approached the animal,
 And happening to take
 The squirming trunk within his hands,
 Thus boldly up and spake:
 "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
 Is very like a SNAKE!"*

*The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
 And felt about the knee
 "What most this wondrous beast is like
 Is mighty plain," quoth he:
 "'Tis clear enough the Elephant
 Is very like a TREE!"*

*The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
 Said: "E'en the blindest man
 Can tell what this resembles most
 Deny the fact who can,
 This marvel of an Elephant
 Is very like a FAN!"*

*The Sixth no sooner had begun
 About the beast to grope,
 Than seizing on the swinging tail
 That fell within his scope,
 "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
 Is very like a ROPE!"*

*And so these men of Indostan
 Disputed loud and long,
 Each in his own opinion
 Exceeding stiff and strong,
 Though each was partly in the right,
 And all were in the wrong!*

Guiding Principle Number One: Have a Goal for Your Communication

A Story

DISASTER RESPONSE AT COM-FSM

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a Tsunami Warning to expect tidal waves to hit Pohnpei Island in two hours. Administration decided to call off work and classes and send everyone home to secure their homes and families. The students were asked to find means of transportation to leave the campus and go home. All vacated the campus in less than one hour. The security car went around using their loud speaker and warned everyone still on campus to leave. Bullhorns were used from the administration and other buildings to direct everyone to leave.

One hour later the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center called off the warning. The college's Emergency Management Team reviewed the response determined that it was a mistake to ask people to leave the campus.

- It seemed the primary goal of communication was to clear the campus even though it was the safest place to be in a tsunami. Both the gymnasium and the library were already designated as safe places on campus during a typhoon.
- The college might possibly have been sending people living near the shore to a place of greater danger, especially in the forecast two-hour period and even more especially given the nature of the road from the college to Kolonia.

At the same time, local authorities may have already been evacuating family members from low-lying areas because of the higher risk of danger in such areas. The potential for chaos was extremely high. Such a scenario happened in Saipan during the 2011 warning that followed the Japan tsunami.

Protocol

Think strategically about your communications and be sure they have the appropriate goal(s). Establish the goal(s) ahead of time, phrase them in action language, develop communication strategies to achieve each goal.

Strategies

In this case perhaps the communication should have had as its goals some of the following:

- Account for the safety and location of all employees and students on campus.

- Coordinate communication with other Emergency Management units.
- Coordinate communication with all campuses.
- Provide ways for students and employees to communicate with their families and loved ones.
- Achieve all emergency response goals within a specified number of minutes.

Creating goals should lead to a strategy (or strategies) for successful communication. That approach is especially critical in emergencies or high-stress situations because people do not process information as well as they would in normal circumstances. For example, if this was the first time students got such a message through campus security using bullhorns, might it induce as much panic as it would a safe response? Also in this case, thinking strategically about how to communicate might involve multiple layers of such communication:

- Clear signage marking buildings as emergency shelters.
- The same emergency message sent through multiple media: Facebook, email, radio, prerecorded automated telephone, email and electronic message board.
- Illustrated posters displayed in high traffic areas that preview the steps to take in a given emergency.
- Regular emergency practice drills so that people have some familiarity with what might occur and what message might be received.
- After-action review of both drills and real emergencies to determine what modes of communication worked best.

The figure below shows a simple model of how this process might work.

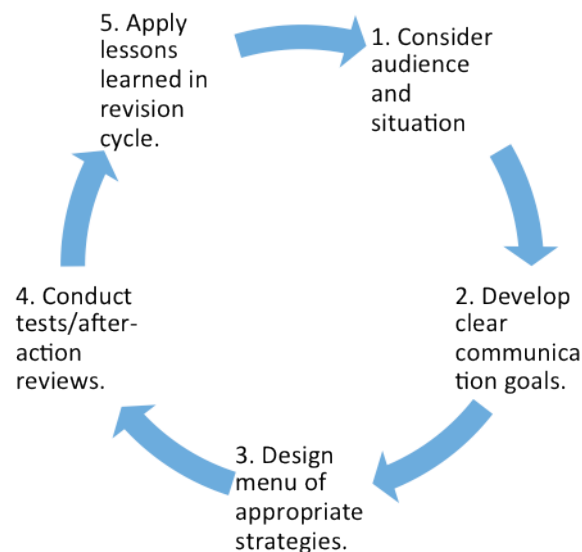


Figure 1. A Model for Using Goals to Develop Communication

Guiding Principle Number Two: You May Need More Than One Mode of Communication to Achieve Your Goal

A Story

AN EMAIL MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

A unit-level manager at a state campus e-mailed a higher-level administrator to secure approval or certification of the additional personnel requisitioned for the campus's financial aid office. Immediately, the higher-level administrator contacted the director of financial aid to solicit thoughts about the request and to explore workable options. The position was originally budgeted under the FY budget; however, since the campus was not able to achieve its revenue and enrollment projections, funds for the position were not available.

In an email to the unit-level manager, the higher-level administrator reported the request was being deferred. Several reasons were cited and alternatives suggested. The unit-level manager sent a follow-up email citing justifications to substantiate that the request was critically necessary to the effective and efficient operations of the office, and requested the reconsideration for the approval of the request. What followed was a flood of email exchanges involving numerous additional parties, with no satisfaction for anyone.

At that point the higher-level administrator finally decided to telephone the state campus dean to talk about the issue, to clarify misunderstandings, and to identify practical and reasonable alternatives. This dialogue finally led to a reasonable solution. Choosing the most effective mode of communication is unquestionably a precondition to quality communication processes. However, sometimes we only begin to realize that we have not made a good choice until misunderstandings have occurred and caused a conflict to erupt. While email is an absolutely convenient tool of communication, it may not be always the best way to communicate everything.

Protocol

Choose the mode of communication that best suits the situation in which you find yourself. You should use the mode that provides the most effective path for achieving your goal. Email may prove the easiest mode, but not necessarily the most effective.

Strategies

In this case, both the unit manager *and* the higher-level administrator missed an opportunity to take early control of the communications on this issue.

- When communicating such requests, it is best to define the problem for the reader first. In this case the unit manager should have gathered and submitted evidence about the harm caused if the request is not granted. Lacking such evidence up front will inevitably lead to a negative decision, or at least a prolonged back and forth exchange in order to discover what evidence does exist.
- Make sure all effected parties are part of the communication from the beginning. In this case the state campus dean and financial aid director should have been included and might have well been the first persons that the unit manager should have contacted about the request. That way options could have been presented early in the exchange.
- Except in extraordinary circumstance, communicate through the normal channels. The higher-level administrator could have asked the unit manager to forward such requests through the state campus dean.

Guiding Principle Number Three: Be Sure You Understand the Situation before You Respond.

A Story

PLACING BLAME

As a member of the faculty, I often complained about how little information was shared by the administration. I felt disconnected and felt I knew very little about what was really happening at the college. After being appointed division chair, I realized, that in fact, the dean of academic programs (DAP) modeled excellent communications. The DAP ensured we met once monthly for a nice breakfast meeting where a great deal of information was shared and matters important to divisions were discussed, debated, and actions often taken. The DAP likewise took important information from the chairs to the vice president for attention and action. I learned a great deal from the DAP about the college operations and also learned a great deal from my fellow division chairs during those monthly meetings.

The reason I previously felt disconnected and knew so little about my organization was because my division chair did not pass along information obtained from the DAP. We did not have monthly, or even division meetings during the semester. In two years, I recall one division meeting. The administration had not been to blame, but instead the members of my division, including myself, who did not take efforts to meet and dialogue. We kept ourselves ignorant of organizational affairs and lost opportunities to learn from one another because we were “too busy” to meet. We operated under the assumption we were wasting each other’s time by calling for meetings, and thought it was more respectful of colleagues to not impose monthly meetings. Though, we had expected to be informed and involved in college decisions, we did not reflect on how that was supposed to have occurred (through regular dialogue). Did we assume the administration would come to inform and involve us individually? It was simpler to blame and be irritated than it was to be proactively engaged.

Protocol

Know your own communication responsibilities and then model the communication behavior you would like to see in others. That dynamic should hold true whether you are sending a message or receiving one. Both senders and receivers have responsibilities.

Strategies

On any given day, the amount of information going back and forth at the college is staggering. Just that which flows in the IT system can average 113 GB per day (Segal). Depending on the mix of data types, this total would convert to just under *seven million pages of information per day*, and that represents just the electronic stuff! (LexBe). Just creating a communication and dropping it into the system does not guarantee that it will reach those intended or achieve the goal you have in mind. The important stuff can easily get lost in all that noise. You might end

up just contributing to the noise or else competing with it. There are a number of strategies that you can employ to make sure you are fully engaged in purposeful dialogue. Here are a few common ones:

- If you are a manager or supervisor or department head, make sure that information that comes to you gets passed along to those under your leadership. Take care to do so in ways that match the needs of your staff. Don't rely on the phrase "It's in the minutes" as a substitute for active engagement with your colleagues.
 - Consider the best *time* to pass on information—not so early that it gets forgotten or so late that there is no time to absorb the content. Maintain a calendar of critical timelines and plan your communications accordingly.
 - Determine whether communication should be written, oral, visual, or a blend of all three. Plan according to the situation and the audience.
 - Prioritize your communications; matters involving *deadlines, resource allocation* or changes in *policy and procedure* should get special attention.
 - Design follow-through actions (informal discussions, meeting agendas, etc.) to be sure that communications were received and understood.
- If you are a faculty or staff member, realize that there is a constant flow of information occurring at the college, and sometimes you may need to go and find it rather than just assume it will come to you. Work with your department chairs or supervisors to come up with the best modes of communicating information within your unit.
- No matter your level at the college, print out the formal definition of Purposeful Dialogue that appears on page 4 and try to incorporate those characteristics in your own communications.

Institutions such as colleges work within their own history, one in which people develop comfort and even self-interest in the way things are. Particularly when communicating changes, it is vital to understand such history in order to choose the most effective mode and content to make such communications reflect purposeful dialogue.

As you work through your need to communicate at the college, you could use the following checklist to make sure you address all the very human concerns and history that may exist in your situation. Doing so should make your communication more effective and help to reduce misunderstandings.

A Checklist for Building Communication Relationships¹

Answer “yes” or “no” to the following questions about your role in maintaining healthy communications.

If you answered “no” to any of the five questions, consider taking the three steps below as a way improve your communication relationships.

1. Have you allowed everyone involved in a matter to complete what they wish to say_____?
2. Have you provided incentives for people to maintain a positive, problem-solving focus_____?
3. Have you handled smoothly differences of opinion, deadline pressures and agitation of those with whom you must communicate_____?
4. Have you used your voice or body language to hamper or disrupt communication_____?
5. Have you done or said anything that will make future communication more difficult_____?

Step 1: Distinguish between individuals and their opinions or negotiating positions.

Step 2: Restate the other person’s views to make sure you understand them; then present your own views.

Step 3: If you must disagree, do so constructively.

- ✓ Be specific in your comments, but avoid casting blame on others.
- ✓ Double-check your facts before making an argument.
- ✓ Use your voice and physical bearing to reduce the stress in a disagreement.
- ✓ If you prevail in a disagreement, work to make sure that others do not feel that they have lost.
- ✓ When you are the one who has harmed communication, accept that responsibility graciously and in good humor.

¹ Adapted from Driskill, Ferrill and Steffey, 1992. *Business & Managerial Communication: New Perspectives*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Orlando.

Guiding Principle Number Four: Exercise Patience and Be Sure that All Voices Have Their Chance to Be Heard.

A Description of Three Navajo Elders in Conversation

As the three old men exchanged pleasant conversation, each waited quietly and patiently for the other to form his thought, put that thought into words, and share it in its entirety before one of the others did the same. At no time did one man interrupt another. At no time did one finish the other's sentence, as we so often do in conversation with a friend. Most interesting was that they always gave each other the time needed to form the thought they ultimately shared.

—Mark Rashid on “patience”
(Rashid)

A Story

The Voice Not Heard

A staff member from a state campus joined a college-wide committee. The only way for such a member of the committee to join a meeting at the National campus was by using a dial-in line that would allow her voice to be heard over a speaker in the meeting room. In theory, this setup was to allow meaningful participation in college affairs by individuals who, because of the distance from Pohnpei, could not attend meetings in person.

But theory does not always match reality, and this staff member found that to be the case, even when the technology worked as planned. She would be introduced when the meeting started, but then the conversation went on as if she was not even there. People began to talk over each other and interrupt each other in ways that made it difficult to understand everything that was being said.

She also felt that there was not a way for her to enter the conversation since she preferred not to interrupt others. After a while, she began to feel that she was not even a part of the meeting. At the end of the meeting, when it seemed clear that everyone was ready to adjourn and leave, the committee chair asked her if she “had anything to add.” At that point she did not speak up, fearing that everyone would blame her for extending the meeting. Whatever wisdom she might have provided to the group had been lost.

Protocol

Try to be as good a listener as you are a talker. Sometimes doing so involves slowing things down a bit to allow others time to work out their thoughts and frame those thoughts in

words, particularly when the topic of conversation is complex or may be new to some of those in the conversation. You might find this protocol is especially helpful when using technology to conduct meetings that involve participants at other campuses.

Strategies

In the story above, using any number of techniques might have allowed the staff member to be more fully involved in the meeting. Here are just a few:

- The person chairing the meeting should monitor the flow of conversation and make sure to draw the silent voices into the dialogue. Don't allow more than a few minutes to pass without asking for an opinion from those not physically in the meeting or those who seem reluctant to speak. Know the personalities of those in your meeting so that you can decide the best way to phrase such requests.
- Allow people time to complete their thoughts without interrupting them. In CPWG meetings, for example, the group decided that individuals should adopt the old radio term of saying "Over" when completing their conversation.
- Another technique the group used was to have each speaker identify themselves before speaking. This technique was especially helpful in allowing those joining the meeting remotely to track the conversation.
- The chair should summarize the status of dialogue on a particular issue before moving on to the next topic or asking for a motion.

Guiding Principle Number Five: Be Aware of How Working in a Multi-Cultural Setting Can Affect Communications.

A Story

A Candidate for the Most Uncomfortable Meeting Ever

A college committee was meeting to review the draft of a plan under its consideration. The person chairing this meeting was doing so for the first time. Another individual was actually presenting the draft plan. After only a few minutes, it became clear that the plan was in a very rough form and probably not ready to be considered at this level. Also after a few minutes, it became clear that the meeting was taking on a decidedly ugly tone. Several committee members were venting their frustration with the plan by offering extremely critical and dismissive comments that bordered on personal attack. Unfortunately, all of these comments were coming from Westerners among the group and were directed at the Micronesian presenting the plan. Other Micronesians on the committee sat in silence, displaying body language that expressed displeasure with this mode of dialogue. So ultimately, only one “voice” was heard. The meeting ended with the draft more or less in tatters and a feeling in the room that the committee was utterly divided by two culturally different patterns of dialogue that were neither compatible nor “purposeful.”

Afterwards the committee chair, who was a Westerner, admitted that he felt the discussion had unfolded in ways that distressed him, but he was not sure how to redirect things.

Protocol

Particularly in higher education, meetings can be the setting for discourse that is highly critical. When you have a group of people trained to think critically about ideas and issues, such discourse may be inevitable and, in some cases, desirable. However, that does *not* mean that the *mode* for expressing criticism must be negative or personal. Following a few simple protocols can help avoid having a meeting such as the one in this story:

- Make sure committee chairs receive training in how to conduct meetings, including how to manage and direct communication in cross-cultural settings.
- Both committee chairs and those bringing documents to a group for action should make sure those documents receive some level of “quiet” critical review beforehand. Doing so would mitigate some of the negative focus that overwhelmed this particular meeting and would also be respectful of those who attend the meeting.

Strategies

In the situation described in this story, the committee chair bears ultimate responsibility for the tenor and direction of the committee's dialogue.

- The chair could act as a “gatekeeper” and make it a practice to meet privately beforehand with those presenting to the committee. If the chair deems the presentation not sufficiently developed, then he or she should provide suggestions for revision and delay presentation before the whole committee.
- The chair could also monitor the flow of dialogue among the group, noting when the gaps and silences among those speaking or not speaking can undermine the effectiveness of the group.

While the chair can set an example and remind committee members to carry out respectful dialogue, individual committee members also bear responsibility for sustaining “purposeful dialogue” Doing so in this case would have meant weighing the effect of the tone of their words on others in the group. The type of critical comment that can be the norm in Western settings might be counterproductive and disrespectful in cross-cultural settings.

Guiding Principle Number Six: Take Responsibility and Ownership for What You Communicate.

A Story

Who Wrote That and When?

Two staff members were searching for the most current version of a policy regarding a human resources matter. Each found a paper copy of such a policy. Neither version of the policy had a listed author or an approval date on it. The two versions seemed to contradict one another in several important respects. Each employee was convinced that her version of the policy was correct, so they took the versions to a supervisor to settle the matter. At that point the supervisor produced a third version of the policy. This version had a date on it, but was twelve years old.

Since so much uncertainty existed about which version of the policy was current, the individuals spent roughly three days of work time searching paper copies of Board of Regents meeting minutes until they found the most recent reference to an approved policy that seemed to mirror the language of one of the versions. Each staff member said they had encountered similar difficulties over the years. The usual response was to just keep using the policy they had always used without being sure it was the most accurate or recent, leaving it likely that some human resources matters were processed incorrectly.

Protocol

The college needs to be sure that all its policies and procedures are maintained as current and accurate.

Strategies

Following a couple of basic strategies can save wasted time and procedural mistakes related to COM-FSM policies and procedures:

- All policy and procedure documents should contain these elements:
 - The name of the author or authors;
 - A version or revision number;
 - Reference to the policy or procedure that this version supersedes; and
 - The date of active approval.
- COM-FSM policies and procedures should be maintained in a central database.
 - The college should issue an annual list of updated policies and procedures. Burying such actions in meeting minutes alone is not sufficient.

- Unit or department managers should purge their own files of outdated documents and distribute the list of updates to employees.

Guiding Principle Number Seven: Provide Opportunities for Communication as a Way to Improve Institutional Effectiveness.

A Story

A Good Idea Missed

A staff member at the college noticed that there was an annoying backup of goods purchased by the college that were held in Customs because their shipping labels did not identify a receiving department. The staff member was fairly new at the college and did not know the history of this issue, but it seemed to him that it could be easily solved by adding a space or code to college shipping orders that identified the specific department awaiting the purchased goods.

But, at that point, this individual did not know for sure where to go to suggest this change, or exactly who would have to approve it, or even whether there were reasons why what seemed a logical change had never been adopted. In his unit there was never a meeting of employees to discuss what common issues they faced or whether there were ways to improve performance.

Partly because he was new, and partly for fear of offending his superiors by suggesting a problem with current procedures, the employee did not offer his suggestion to anyone. The shipping delays continued.

Protocol

A number of important communication issues came into play in this simple story, which illustrates normal difficulties in “problem solving” scenarios.

- First, to fix a problem, you need to fully understand it. Remember the story of Rikki Tikki Tavi in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*: “The motto of all the mongoose family is ‘Run and find out.’” (Kipling) That motto is a good one for all communicators.
- Second, to communicate about a problem you need to know the decision paths within your organization.
- Third, if you are a manager, then your employees need an effective way to bring problems and solutions to your attention or to discuss them with one another.

Strategies

The table that follows offers a question sequence that can prove helpful in understanding the full dimensions of the problem you wish to address. Be like Rikki Tikki Tavi.

Table 1. Understand the Problem before You Try to Solve It.

<p>The following problem-solving sequence is adapted from one developed in the 1970s by Prof. Michael G. Moran when he was at Clemson University. These questions help generate ideas for thinking and writing about complex issues or problems within an institution. Such a question sequence (or some variation of it) will make it easier for you to be sure you understand the problem in all its dimensions before you try proposing a solution. Ideally, you should be able to answer all of the questions in the sequence before you proceed.</p> <p><i>Note that the word “problem” can mean that there is something wrong, or it could just mean that something could be done more effectively, or even that there is a lack of necessary information about a matter.</i></p>	
Problem-Solving Questions	Comments
<p><i>Does a problem exist?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the signs of the problem? • What is the evidence that the problem exists? • What is the specific harm? • How widespread is the harm? • What is the present system doing to solve the problem? 	<p>Answering these questions really helps you understand whether the “problem” you are concerned about is serious enough to require further action. Even when the “problem” is defined for you (such as in an accreditation report), you may still need to answer these questions before proceeding.</p>
<p><i>Who or what causes or contributes to the problem?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do people or circumstances cause the problem? • Why do people or circumstances cause the problem? • For how long has the problem existed? • Does anyone benefit from the problem's existence? If so, in what ways? • Has anyone attempted to solve this problem before? If so, how and with what result? 	<p>Answering these questions will help you gauge some of the institutional realities that might underlie the problem's existence.</p> <p>Do not underestimate the value of understanding the history of a problem before trying to communicate a solution. Such understanding can help you think strategically about your communication, including who is affected and which mode of communication to use and in what sequence.</p>
<p><i>What is the structure of the present system?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the present system be changed to solve the problem? • What will happen if the present system is changed? • Why does the present system tolerate the problem? 	<p>Answering these questions should help you understand the “big picture” surrounding the problem that concerns you. Few problems in an institution occur in isolation from the rest of the place. If there are institutional barriers to solving the problem, these answers will guide you in thinking about how to address such issues.</p>
<p><i>Can the problem be solved?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the possible effects of solving the problem? • What will happen if the problem is not solved? • What are the criteria for solving the problem? • How much will a solution cost? • How much will a solution save? 	<p>Solutions may introduce new problems or produce unanticipated results. Answering these questions is a good example of “planning ahead.”</p> <p>Think of both <i>cost</i> and <i>save</i> in broad terms: money, time, efficiency, etc.</p> <p>Developing specific criteria for solving a problem is a critical step in communicating about it. Answering this question helps people reach common understanding of what conditions must exist for the problem to be solved.</p>

Experienced communicators often keep near them a copy of the organization or governance charts of their institutions. This simple step serves as a constant reminder of two important realities:

- Who might be affected by a communication and should thus be “in the loop”?
- Which decision paths will a communication need to pass through in order to achieve its goals?

Employee feedback sessions indicated a real desire to have time set aside for regular discussion of ways to improve a unit’s performance. Managers would do well to provide such avenues for purposeful dialogue at that level. Even at a small campus, it is easy for employees to become “office bound,” separated by walls or desks without a designated time or space to talk about ways to improve unit performance.

The aerial photograph below (of National Campus) serves as a reminder that all the COM-FSM campuses have relatively small physical footprints. Yet within that small space, communication can become remote and bureaucratic if no one takes care to provide a better environment for purposeful dialogue.



Figure 2. Aerial view of COM-FSM National Campus. 2013. Photo courtesy of Beca. Note that the overall footprint of even the National Campus is compact and should make face-to-face communication relatively easy.

Guiding Principle Number Eight: Think Before You Press “Send.”

The speed and convenience of electronic communication and social media have transformed the flow of information within and across institutions. While this transformation has increased productivity on some levels, many of the traditional filters provided by slower modes of communication have been lost.

A Story

A Different Kind of Noise

Every time I think of “communication” and communication through email, I think of the “Parking Lot” discussion.

A few years ago the college was renovating the parking lot. The maintenance department decided to send out a questionnaire to the college community via email asking what their “opinion” was on the parking lot and how we were to maintain it. Many suggestions came in such as we should have 1) paid parking 2) have reserved parking 3) have parking become first come first served and so forth...

At first, I thought that it was good that maintenance wanted the opinion of all in order to make a collective decision. However, the discussion got out of hand when some suggestions led to other discussions such as how to allocate reserved parking (by seniority? Some other way?). Then this discussion led to whether traditional leaders and other “important positions” in the college and community should have reserved parking. That discussion moved to *what defines* and *who defines* the “important positions.” People were expressing opinions about everything as one topic led to another. Everyone wanted to say something about the parking lot and everyone’s inboxes were flooded with the subject heading “parking lot.” Some people just replied to “all” with such reply as “I agree.” These exchanges went on for weeks... and people were sending out emails asking everyone not to include them in their “parking lot” discussion and finally IT stopped it by reminding us about the IT policy on use of email.

I think this is a great example of how communication can get out of hand; though it was good that maintenance wanted input from the community about a project they were doing. In hindsight, I think it would have been more effective if they did a survey or held some focus group discussions rather than send an open-ended question via email because it led to very unconstructive communication and, in the end, really irritated people. What started out as good intent (to collect input from college community to make decision) turned out to be a waste of time because the whole process mushroomed out of control. Whatever useful information might have been there got drowned in the flood of emails.

The phrase “got drowned in a flood of emails” may become an all too common reality at the college.

Protocol

The speed of electronic communications means that dynamic can trigger all sorts of instant responses. Remember that readers tend to react moment to moment in very human ways. When you choose the mode and content of a communication, be sure to reflect on whether your words may trigger a very human response that is not the one that serves your goal.

Strategies

It is a bit ironic that electronic information that is not on paper can also be so combustible. Here are a couple strategies for lowering the temperature, mostly involving taking time to reflect on the impact upon your readers of what you are saying and how you are saying it. Communication creates its own history. Consider how your own history might look to those with whom you need to maintain working relationships over time. A good deal of successful communication in the workplace involves managing disagreement in respectful ways.

- Before you press the “Send” icon, take a few minutes to reflect. Imagine the effect on your reader of two things:
 - the wording in your subject line;
 - the first sentence of your message.
- If you feel yourself reacting to a message with anger or resentment, DO NOT respond immediately. Go for a walk, turn to another task, or consider whether you need to wait and determine the best way to drain the negative emotion from the situation.
 - You might decide a face-to-face meeting is in order.
 - You might preface such a meeting with a phone call.
 - You might attempt a Skype call if possible.

Remember that people tend to communicate more professionally and respectfully when they can see each other. You don’t have to look far to see examples of how the “cloak” of using email can make people behave badly.

- Avoid using the “Reply All” or “cc:” functions without considering whether doing so might make a difficult situation even worse. One good test is to imagine whether your communication was occurring in person and whether you would start calling in all the people in our reply or cc: list to join the conversation.
- Remember that email is never really private, especially in the workplace. Do not write something in an email that you would not want the entire cyber-world to see.

Guiding Principle Number Nine: Planning Ahead Means Thinking about the Big Picture.

Thinking ahead usually focuses on only one point of view, and when action is taken it often adds problems instead of solving them. *Planning* ahead involves taking the big picture into consideration, including what is currently happening and what may occur in the future.

—Mark Rashid. 2003. *Life Lessons of a Ranch Horse*.

A Story

Eating Away at the Big Picture

During a college-wide Finance Committee Meeting, there was a request to approve certain amounts from the Fund Balance for renovation projects at the different campuses. One request was made to spend a certain amount for external painting of the LRC or Library and the Computer Lab at state campus. Being the representative of that campus, I was puzzled by the proposed external painting when the LRC ceiling was falling down. I said that I was not going to vote on the issue because I knew that the LRC needed more renovation than cosmetic painting. One of the committee members asked that the others listen to me since I was the representative of the concerned campus, and I should know more about my campus. The committee asked me to provide them with pictures of the ceiling, which I later did. The pictures showed extensive damage done by termites. The committee approved more money and repair of the ceiling and painting of the buildings took place. However, because there was evidence of termite infestation of the lumbers holding up the ceiling, it was discussed that a device that has been proven to chase away termites be acquired and planted in the soil at the termite-infested buildings. As of this writing, this device has not been provided, and I am 100% sure that the termites are actively eating away the wood.

This particular story contains any number of uncertainties that ought to have been resolved through communication.

- Should the termite problem have already been in front of the committee?
- Was there a long-term maintenance or reconstruction plan that served as context for decisions?
- Was there a failure in committee communications that resulted in the termite device not being included or was there just a lack of “planning ahead” by committee members?
- How many layers of communication had to occur before the termite device was acquired and who was responsible for tracking the communication process through all the layers?

You can think of uncertainty in such circumstances as a kind of equation:

What you need to know to achieve your goal What you do know Uncertainty
 When communication processes through layers of an organization fail, something like the classic “Tree Swing” cartoon can result.

The Classic Illustration of the Tree Swing.



What marketing suggested.

What management approved.

What engineering designed.

What was manufactured.

What maintenance installed.

What the customer wanted.

(Public Domain Images retrieved 10/04/13 from http://www.businessballs.com/businessballs_treeswing_pictures.htm.) (Domain)

Protocol

Resolve uncertainties—or at least determine and characterize their seriousness—in any communications that involve action, risk or resources. Design communications so that they can pass through layers of the institution in such a way that critical content is understood. Otherwise, you may have “learned men” feeling the same elephant and “seeing” something different.

Strategies

This story came last because it defines a situation in which many of the strategies already discussed can apply.

- Make sure people are working with a complete body of the information that might affect their decision. The Problem-Solving sequence on page 18 would have been quite helpful in addressing the whole question of renovations at the Chuuk Campus.
- Make the effort to determine what you don’t know. Apply the uncertainty equation as an additional analytical step in gauging your readiness to act. Remember again the motto of all the mongoose family: “Run and find out.”
- Make sure that there are no misunderstandings that result from the fact that communication is occurring in a cross-cultural setting.
- Use an organizational chart to make sure no affected parties are left out of the communication loop.
- When a decision is made that requires communicating action, make sure that all involved know who owns the responsibility for communicating the decision clearly through layers of the organization.

Some Thoughts from the Group.

During their discussions on this project, members of the Communications Policy Working Group provided many insights about communication practices at COM-FSM. The graphic below contains some of these insights.

Thoughts from Members of the CPWG on Strengthening Purposeful Dialogue

- Consider the reader’s situation, attitude, etc. Consider that communications do not occur in a vacuum. Something always happened before and will happen after, and those "things" can frame a reader's attention to what you write or say.
- Visualize the path of a communication through the institution.
- Determine the level of formality required in a communication.
- Consider the importance of just “talking” first.
- Develop a habit of reserving judgments and decisions: listen patiently [to speaker/or what is in writing] and complete a factual review prior to making up your mind.
- In a multi-cultural situation, language, body language and even certain wording may be understood very differently - an example is “silence means agreement.” This idea may be true in the Western culture but in Micronesian culture, silence can mean NO agreement.
- Determine the lifespan of a communication. Some communications must be saved for use and UNDERSTANDING by later readers.
- Title and label all communications for efficiency and impact.
- Take pride in “authorship.” Place your name on your documents.
- At the first sign of conflict, it is a good idea to consider how differences in communication style might have created a misunderstanding.
- Identify your own responsibilities to communicate. Observe professional practice in email.

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