

Division of Science, Research and Technology

Research Project Summary

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What NJDEP Managers and Staff Think About Communicating with the Public, and Improving Agency Infrastructure for Supporting Program Communications

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Abstract

Interviews were conducted with managers and staff of NJDEP about their respective programs' communications with the public. Two unique perspectives were revealed. The perspective that researchers labeled as "Enthusiastic" emphasized that program managers and program culture supported communication, it was everyone's job, and the program used its experience for continuous improvement of communications that were not required by law or regulation. The perspective labeled "Constrained" emphasized the lack of operational resources (time, expertise, access to decision-makers), the difficulty of responding to public demand for more or better communications, reliance on common sense rather than training, and increasing communication when need for public acceptance increased. Both groups felt communication was essential to program success, and tended to downplay public or other external barriers to external communication effectiveness. More generally, interviewees noted that proactive communication and evaluation of communication were both desirable but erratic. Use of job performance appraisals to specifically assess individuals' communication with the public, and praise for good communication performance, was thought to vary widely. While the Office of Communications and the Press Office did garner praise, many interviewees thought their services were little known or used, or could be improved with better communication between them and programs. Recommendations for improving agency infrastructure to support program communications thus included increasing program commitment to communication (through both attitudinal and operational resources), increasing proactive communication and evaluation, encouraging use of job performance appraisals to foster good communication, and clarifying communication and relations between central communication offices and programs.

Introduction

Little research has been done on how agency personnel think about communications to the public (Shaw and Johnson, 1990). Interviews with New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) managers and staff provided qualitative data on important external communication issues for the agency. This summary reports on that qualitative research.

Methods

"Communication" was defined very broadly to include all kinds of contacts between the program and the public, including public hearings, telephone and face-to-face conversations with individuals, brochures, Websites, joint problem-solving efforts, and mass media during both normal and emergency situations, among many other examples. Interviews were conducted in 2005 with 55 individuals (and one group) from across the agency, including 4 in Communications and Legislation, 3 in Compliance and Enforcement, 14 in Environmental Regulation, 15 in Land Use Management, 7 in Natural and Historic Resources, 4 in Policy, Planning and Science, and 8 (plus a group of 5 people) in Site Remediation and Waste Management. Two-thirds had supervisory responsibilities (from Assistant Commis-

sioner down to Research Scientist and Environmental Scientist). Two-thirds had science or engineering degrees only, and two-thirds of interviewees had some kind of communications training.

The interviewees were asked to describe their program's "current communications with the public" in part by sorting 47 statements by level of agreement or disagreement. These statements concerned the role of communication with the public in the program's functioning (e.g., its importance, motivations for it, the degree to which it is integrated with management decisions); barriers and opportunities to effective communication (both internal and external to the agency or program); and the roles that managers, staff and other programs play in program communications. Factor analysis of these sorts, in which people who rated the same statements similarly were grouped together, revealed which statements distinguished one group's views from the other group's views. In conjunction with people's comments about the statements and answers to questions (for example, about their ideal for program communications), the factor analysis yielded the results (including group labels of Enthusiastic and Constrained for the interviewees holding these two

perspectives) discussed below.

Results

Two Distinctive Viewpoints on Communications, Particularly Programmatic Commitments. As described in the Methods section above, people divided into two groups depending upon their reaction to these 47 communication statements. The Enthusiastic and Constrained groups were named based on the views about which they felt most strongly, which are described in the next two paragraphs. Who fell into which group did not appear to be shaped by educational background, communication training, years in NJDEP or the program, gender, or unit of the agency in which they worked. There were more people (20) who were purely in the Enthusiastic group than those purely in the Constrained group (8)—the rest held mixtures of these views—but it is unknown whether this ratio is true throughout the agency.

The Enthusiastic group was defined by belief that communication is part of the culture of their program, something to which their managers are committed, and it is everyone's job in the program. This group also said that their program built on experience for continued improvement in communications, that these efforts were not required by law or regulation, and that political agendas of citizens did not interfere with communications. This group rated the quality of their program communications as 80 (the median rating, on scale from 0=worst possible to 100=best possible).

The Constrained group, by contrast, was defined by strong disagreement that their program had the expertise; time, money and staff; or visibility, status, and access to decision-makers by communicators needed for effective communications. They also disagreed that their program could meet public demands for more or better communication. They said that their program tended to rely on common sense rather than training in communication, and the program increased communication efforts as the program's need for public acceptance of a policy or project increased. They tended to believe that citizens' ability to take part in outreach efforts was limited by time and resources. This group rated the quality of their program communications as 60 on the same 0-100 scale.

For the statements that one group strongly agreed (or disagreed) with, as listed above, the other group tended to very mildly disagree (agree). This meant, for example, that the Enthusiastic group did not talk only about attitudinal resources (such as managerial support, culture, and communication being part of everyone's job in the program); they acknowledged time, money, expertise, and other operational resource constraints on program communications. In fact, the ideal program communication for everyone appeared to be one in which both attitudinal and operational resources were in full supply, and program communications were more proactive and inclusive (see below). But whereas for the Constrained group operational resources were the focus of concern, they were not central to the Enthusiastic group's percep-

tions of current program communications with the public. These two views were not simply opposites (optimistic or pessimistic), but quite different ways of looking at program communications.

Most units in which there were multiple interviews (including Assistant Commissioner functional areas, Divisions and Bureaus) exhibited both perspectives, plus other people with opinions mixing the two. Thus this difference in views might not reflect objective differences across programs in the nature or quality of their communications with the public. For example, the Enthusiastic group's programs' communications may not be much better than those of the Constrained group, despite the difference in their median ratings of program quality. The difference might be due more to personal proclivity to focus on certain issues and not others. The current evidence does not allow identification of the true reason; a quantitative study that includes both a larger sample of DEP personnel and objective measures of quality (e.g., success at achieving program communication goals) might do so.

Shared Views about Communication as Essential to Programs, Not Compromising Science and Not Compromised by Public Emotions or Ignorance. Almost everyone believed that communication was essential to their program's success, not merely an optional add-on, although many knew of other agency staff who did not share that view. The benefits of communication outweighed the difficulties it sometimes caused. Innovations in communication were acceptable to their programs, and they were unable (and many felt it was inappropriate) to delegate communication to specialists. They felt that communication did not compromise the scientific basis for decisions; they felt political pressures were more likely to produce such compromises.

Respondents generally felt that public emotions and lack of general knowledge about science or policies did not pose much problem for communications. People agreed that the public could make demands for which programs lacked the authority, a relatively small problem, for two reasons. One was poor agency assistance to citizens (e.g., program names and website design that did not accurately represent their functions and distinguish them from other programs; uninformed or unhelpful telephone screening and forwarding). The other reason was conflicts between the statutory limits or bureaucratic organization of program scope and authority, and citizens' views of the scope and authority needed for appropriate environmental protection.

Proactive Communication is Desirable but Erratic. Some programs planned communication early in their decision-making, before a (draft) final project, rule or policy was announced, and many others said this is what they should be doing but had not yet achieved. Similarly, partnerships with outside entities, including citizens, to collect data, solve problems, or decide how to manage risks were praised far more frequently than implemented. An apparent gap between rhetorical support for proactive communications and actual program activities has been

identified in research on other agencies as well. Both proactive work and partnerships were supported as part of ideal program communications.

Evaluation is Desirable but Erratic. Evaluation of communication effects and effectiveness was recognized as desirable, but few programs had anything more than informal, after-the-fact means of evaluation (e.g., one person noted that “we didn’t get yelled at”). Many weren’t sure how to evaluate or what criteria to use for success or failure.

Rating and Praising Job Performance. Interviewees (two-thirds of whom rate at least one other person on the PES/PAR) had very diverse reactions to the statement, “In my program, a criterion for rating job performance is quality of communication with the public.” These ranged from very strong agreement to outright denial this is a standard for job performance. One common assumption was that communication with the public must be a criterion because the rating form includes communication skills (verbal, writing) as one formal rating dimension; however, that rating section does not specify the audience for these communications as the public, or specify other skills. Another common “assumption [is] that I’ll communicate successfully, so performance [is] not rated on this.”

Whether people thought they received constructive feedback on their communications depended on whether they thought their managers were well-informed enough to provide such feedback; assessments of managers’ competence varied widely. Although a few people reported being recognized for good communication from senior agency managers (and many more from their own immediate managers), the general feeling was that nobody noticed (or cared) about successful communication, only about failures. This bias was seen as undermining both organizational learning (from either success or failure) and morale.

Centralization. Interviewees felt that some centralization of communication functions is inevitable and desirable, but it has both advantages and disadvantages, and the way in which relative centralization or decentralization is done can be beneficial or detrimental. While interviewees thought internal communication was critical to the outcome of communication to the public, and felt inter-program (lateral) communication fell short of desirable, their main concern seemed to be that the then-current mode of centralization was neither reaping its full advantages nor minimizing the disadvantages.

No questions were asked directly about the Office of Communications (OC) or Press Office (PO), except to the extent that some members of those offices were interviewed about their own program’s communications. But many people offered opinions, based on their personal or own program’s experience with those offices. These comments tended to be more neutral or negative than positive, although a few praised the aid provided by these offices. Contrary to OC/PO staff belief that program

comments would be driven by a feeling of too little attention from these offices (whose limited resources must go to high-priority issues), program concerns were largely, though not entirely, directed at getting too much or the wrong kind of attention from OC and PO.

The OC was little understood by DEP personnel (several used its title when referring to the Press Office, or admitted they did not know what it did or what services it might offer to programs), and OC staff likewise felt misunderstood. Partly this reflected disagreement on what OC functions are or should be. One opinion expressed by interviewees was that it is or should be an office that vets program communications for consistency with current agency-wide substantive and formatting policies. A second opinion was that the OC is or should be a technical support office that helps programs to improve their ability to achieve their communication goals. A third opinion was that the OC does or should ensure that program materials over-burdened with technical and bureaucratic jargon are made understandable and salient to lay audiences. A fourth opinion about OC functions among interviewees was that its intervention can sometimes delay needed communications. OC interviewees felt program staff resist providing needed information (and thus OC staff felt sympathetic with frustrated outsiders on whose behalf they’re often working), do not appreciate the goals and constraints with which OC staff operate, and are unduly suspicious that the OC’s aim is “suppressing information or putting a particular spin on [it].” Partly this view reflected inadequate inter-program conversation about what services programs want and what services the OC can provide, so that these can be better matched.

The PO is far better known than the OC, and interviewee comments fell into three groups. The first group of comments was that there is insufficient balance between the need for press releases to be understandable and to be accurate, with programs often having little control of the process to ensure accuracy. The second group of comments concerned what interviewees saw as excessive supervision by PO of pre-approved conversations with reporters. They argued that a less intrusive approach would be warranted, given trustworthiness of experienced managers and staff, flexibility, limited PO resources, and greater, inevitable intertwining of policy and science than interviewees thought PO staff realize exists. The third set of comments involved a belief that senior managers placed too much importance on press coverage: while important in many cases, interviewees felt that it is far from the only (and may not be the best) way to achieve communication goals. Some interviewees noted that mass media news exposure is dropping for the population as a whole and for important sub-populations, and they and others thought that non-media methods for conveying information, changing behavior, etc. often are more effective and efficient. Press coverage is easy to measure, but interviewees suggested the ultimate goal may not be coverage but what exposure to the coverage accomplishes, which is much harder to measure.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that NJDEP managers and staff are very positive about communication with the public in the abstract, as are many about the communication efforts their programs have actually implemented, but that several internal barriers prevent full use of the communication opportunities they see as essential to their programs' success. The fact that these barriers are seen as primarily internal is advantageous, as these are the ones over which NJDEP has most control.

The results of this study of 60 people's opinions, in an agency with about 3,400 employees, indicate the following:

Commitment to Communication is Important to Program Function. Attitudinal resources (managerial support; support from program culture; feeling that communication is part of everyone's job in the program) and operational resources (time; money, visibility, status, and access to decision-makers for communicators, expertise) are apparently not the same kinds of program commitments, because our two groups differed on which kind got their attention. Both formed part of people's program ideal for communications, and logically both are needed. However, it appears that for the Enthusiastic group their limited operational resources were less of a bar to (perceived) program and communication success than for the Constrained group, implying that attitudinal resources might be a more important constraint on communications than operational resources. (As yet there are no data on whether one is more important to objective success of the program or its communications; we can only talk about which seems more important for perceptions of success by managers and staff.) Strong encouragement and modeling of effective communication by senior and mid-level agency managers, combined with incentives (e.g., wider incorporation of communication into job performance evaluations—see below; praise for good communication jobs by programs and individuals, not only criticism of disasters), can be one means to improve that sense of support. While the current data do not allow determination of whether there is a causal relationship between communication responsibilities and positive views, programs using the specialist model of communication might consider whether it is indeed superior to making it everyone's job for their particular functions.

As for operational resources, better targeted training and support services can deal with the expertise issue. Budget and staff time problems will be harder to fix in the short term. More proactive communication and increased (perceived) support from managers could help with the disjuncture between how essential communication is perceived to be to the program, and the lack of visibility, status, and access that Constrained people see for communicators in their programs. Other research has suggested that almost no communication efforts receive line-item status in either legislative appropriations or internal agency budgets, which means that communication can become an afterthought in continual battle for

priority with other program tasks. While this battle is inevitable, making the importance of communication clear by explicitly giving it a line in the program or agency budget—even if this line is on paper rather than a separate account—could help managers keep the tradeoffs clearer when priorities are being set under resource constraints.

Proactive Communication and Evaluation Need to Be Encouraged. If there is a gap between how programs would like to conduct their communications (e.g., plan for them before policy or program decisions are made; promote partnerships; evaluate whether communications succeeded or failed, and why) and what they actually do, determining why there is this gap is the first step. Determining this was beyond the scope of this study, but could be tackled in future studies.

The evaluation of program communications both during and after communications efforts can be crucial to learning how to do it better, but few programs do it, much less systematically. Development and testing of program-specific, and for some major efforts communication-specific, evaluation criteria and methods should be encouraged. In addition, the agency might consider development of some agency-wide evaluation criteria, so as to allow for comparison across programs. Such comparisons would allow central communication offices to determine (for example) which programs might be facing greater challenges and thus need more help.

Managers Should Consider Making Communications with the Public an Explicit Part of Job Performance Discussions with Staff. This would not be appropriate for every program or every person within a program, but interviews indicated that the current universal performance factor of "communication" ("effective expression of ideas, concepts or directions in individual or group situations") neither motivates nor evaluates individuals' communications with the public in most cases. While our interviewees indicated that they saw communication as essential for program success, many said that they knew of managers and staff who did not see it that way, and thus were unwilling to devote the time, attitude, and other resources needed for success. Managers who discussed with each relevant person they supervised whether and how to include communication with the public under the open-ended "individual job responsibilities" section of the rating form would improve their ability to both motivate and evaluate individual performance in this area, and make it more consistent with program needs. In the process, managers also would be able to determine the degree of variation in their units about communication, and thus determine whether group discussion of constraints and potential solutions might be a useful complement to individual discussions.

Central-Program Relations and Communications Need to Be Clearer. Although tensions between central offices and operational programs are inevitable, these interviews suggest that improvements could be made.

First, a clear listing of currently available resources that the Office of Communications and the Press Office could provide to programs (copy-editing, education, etc.) and OC/PO constraints would ensure that all programs would at least know of these support services. An agency-wide survey could supplement this list by (a) identifying the level of programmatic interest in these and other services, so that OC/PO could determine if adding expertise in these areas would be warranted, and (b) asking employees about supplemental services (e.g., marketing or public participation expertise) they or others in the agency could provide to outside programs (consistent with their own program needs).

Second, clear communication of standard formats desired by central units (e.g., logo; numeric and spelling conventions; reading level of communications for the general public, and how to achieve it in drafting documents; etc.) would reduce both program and central office frustration over materials that must be revised again and again. However, the success of standard formats would be enhanced if they were not promulgated unilaterally (central offices decide on these formats and then order programs to follow them), but rather cooperatively whenever possible (e.g., "we are proposing X because this makes Y better; do you have suggestions on how to achieve this goal that would be preferable to X?"). This partnership approach not only gives programs more ownership of changes (and thus less frustration), it also can take advantage of programs' experience to ensure that the net result of any standard changes is beneficial for programs too.

Third, cross-program communication and collaboration would be potentially useful to supplement the program support that central offices could supply. The approach in the past was to identify people designated as their own program's specialist for communications (usually by who organizers knew), and invite them to take part in quarterly meetings. However, the recruitment process left out programs for which communication is everyone's job, rather than delegated to one person. Furthermore, communication needs of programs were so diverse that it was hard to find topics on which everyone could agree, and conventional scheduling meant many interested parties could not attend. A survey could identify the full range of desired topics and interested parties for in-person meetings and presentations; electronic scheduling could maximize their feasibility. Such a survey also could identify whether and which programs would be interested in mutual information distribution (e.g., two programs make each other's communication materials available at their respective public meetings and events, assuming the originating program is responsible for providing materials), cross-references on websites, and other means to take advantage of each other's outreach at minimum cost or inconvenience to either program.

Fourth, while people in the Enthusiastic group said their programs built upon experience to improve communications, the experience of the entire agency is even deeper than that of any one program. Building an open-access

online communication clearinghouse on DEPNet could be valuable. Unlike program or department-wide communication efforts (e.g., i-mapNJ) that are placed on the Web so external audiences can obtain agency information, this project would be for internal access only, so that DEP staff could share ideas and resources informally before going public. The clearinghouse would allow both centralized offices and programs to make available their guidelines, sample communications, expertise available for internal consulting (at discretion of the program manager), links to useful non-DEP information on everything from press relations to public participation to surveys, and other resources. Programs could upload (voluntarily) draft communication plans and materials, evaluation criteria, etc., and ask for feedback from others in the agency, thus expanding the expertise that they can tap. In turn, these draft or final plans, materials, criteria, etc., plus results of internal and external evaluations, can provide potential models to other programs, as well as long-term memory for programs that will be facing many retirements and thus loss of experience in the next several years.

Conclusion

If communication with the public is essential to (most) DEP programs' success, as these interviewees say it is, then the agency needs to provide a supportive infrastructure that will allow programs to maximize that success. This small study has identified through interviews some ways in which the agency's current infrastructure could be enhanced at relatively low cost. However, the collaborative effort of many managers and staff, within and across programs, will allow the identification and implementation of a fuller set of communication-enhancing options.

References

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