



Pattern-Based Communication Planning in Complex Systems

by Royce Holladay

Recently I worked with a group of middle managers charged with the task of leading a system-wide change initiative. Their considerations included programmatic, organizational, and service delivery changes. At the same time, they were shifting from a, program-determined silo structure to one that required collaborative planning across all programs. This group of individuals was expected to become a team to support and inform changes in the organization's core work across 18 sites, 1000 employees, and close to 20,000 direct service recipients.

In the months since receiving their charge, this group had worked diligently to fulfill expectations, to share new ideas, and to support the staff across all sites. They were beginning to see their work come to fruition in many ways and areas across the system. They were frustrated, however, feeling they didn't have connections or authority to bring about the magnitude of change that was required.

How could the principles and practices of HSD help this group think about their work differently? How could they move forward in coherent and collaborative ways that would move the whole organization forward? That was their question when I met with them for a half day of planning.

How, in today's turbulent and quickly changing organizations, can you plan for careful and informed communications strategies? With so many audiences needing information about so many ideas from such varied perspectives, how is it possible to create system-wide patterns of transparency, role clarity, informed decision making?

Consider what those patterns mean across the system.

- **Transparency:** You know the over-arching direction and priorities of the system. You know what decisions are being made, who is responsible for making those decisions, and how those decisions get made. As far as is possible and necessary, you have access to rationale and outcomes of decisions that impact your work.
- **Role clarity:** You are aware of your role in contributing to the sustainability of the system, and you step into that responsibility with personal accountability. You have access to the available resources to do your work, have the requisite skills, and get feedback that helps you improve continuously. You are also aware of others' roles as they relate to enhancing or benefitting from your own contributions.
- **Informed decision making:** You have access to information you need to make decisions that resolve tension in the system. A commonly shared decision-

making process allows for system-wide coherence and deep consideration of implications and options, relative to the questions you explore.

As we worked together we explored the conditions that would influence these patterns across the multiple groups they touched. Recognizing they needed to clarify their thinking about a number of issues, they realized that each issue had different meanings and implications for the different audiences/groups in the system. They also knew they needed to clarify the ways they shared information and resources across the system. They needed a thorough communications plan that would contribute to and model the patterns they wanted to create.

By using the Eoyang CDE model, we found questions that could clarify their own thinking about these patterns. The CDE model names three conditions that shape patterns in complex systems.

The “C” represents the container that bounds the system and holds it in place until the pattern can emerge.

In this case we identified a number of containers by asking, “What groups or individuals are crucial to our success?” And by saying “our” success they were recognizing a shared contribution to the system’s success, rather than individual or small-group successes alone.

The “D” represents the differences that matter inside a particular container. It speaks to the many ways parts of the system may be different from each other, both in kind and in proportionality. For instance, it may speak to the difference in kind between a) the history and research about a topic and b) creative vision and innovation about a topic. Or it may speak to proportional difference in one area. For instance, there may be different levels of awareness about history and research about a topic.

In this description of communication planning, they came to agree on a question that would help them define the important differences in each container. “What important questions or issues do we need to discuss or address?”

Finally the “E” represents the exchanges that allow the system to share information, time, and other resources internally in the container and across boundaries to other containers.

In this case, the group realized that for them, it was not just the information they needed to share, it was also the venue or forum they needed to consider. So they divided the Exchange discussion into two questions: “What opportunities or venues are needed or available for this work?” and “Given the event or venue, what content is fit for purpose?”

By using these or similar questions, you can sort out conditions that shape the patterns you want, considering the characteristic differences across your whole system. This group, and others who use the CDE model have found that it helps to untangle the overlapping and often-confusing redundancies and interdependencies in the system. Use the tables on the next page as guides for creating your own communications plan. Map out specific responsibilities for creating conditions in your system to create patterns of transparency, role clarity, and informed decision making.

Be in touch and let us know how it goes!

Royce



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Communications Planning			
Group:			
Date:			
Containers	Differences	Exchanges	
		Event/Venue	Content
<i>What groups or individuals are crucial to our success?</i>	<i>What important questions or issues do we need to discuss/address?</i>	<i>What opportunities or venues are available or needed for this work?</i>	<i>Given the event or venue, what content is fit to purpose?</i>

Next steps to make this happen:

What's to be done?	Who will do it?	By when?