Solutions

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SEA Strategic Communications

A Stakeholder Approach to Prioritize Communications Efforts

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The Question

How can you best use my limited communications resources to productively engage with the diverse and disparate stakeholder groups that include legislators, business leaders, and parents to support the implementation of education reforms?

State education agencies (SEAs) are central players in initiating and leading new reform efforts. However, traditional approaches to providing public information are not adequate for producing the necessary awareness and support to implement reforms statewide and at the local level. Also, SEAs often have very few staff or other resources devoted to communication systems. With limited resources for communications, it becomes even more critical to efficiently plan the allocation of resources for engagement of stakeholders. In addition, stakeholders' involvement in reform vary from "active and supportive" to "inactive and non-supportive".

Ensuring that SEA's accurately identify stakeholders, analyze and classify stakeholders, and prioritize stakeholders will inform communications plans so that SEAs can intentionally use limited resources to focus on priority stakeholders.

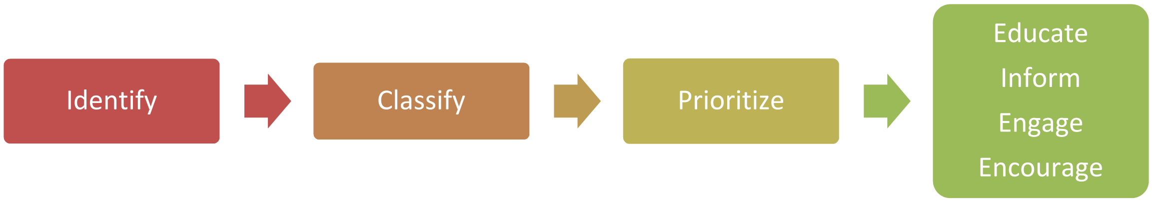
Developing a Stakeholder Plan

The most commonly used definition of a stakeholder is "any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives."[1] (For the purpose of this document, the words "stakeholder" and "audience" may be used interchangeably.) The stakeholder approach to communication planning will require an analysis of the stakeholders in the SEA's scope of interest and consists of three steps:

1. Identify stakeholders;

[1] Freeman, R. E., (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Boston: Pitman Publishing.

2. Analyze and classify them into meaningful groups; and
3. Prioritize them.[2]



Taking on a systematic approach to mapping the identified stakeholders and being strategic and clear about whom you are engaging and why, can help save both time and money while ensuring that you are effectively reaching key stakeholders.

Identifying Stakeholders

Many SEAs have routine and robust mechanisms for informing LEAs of policy changes and new initiatives. Successfully implementing new statewide reforms has required SEAs to conduct outreach with new and often loosely organized stakeholder groups, such as legislators, parents, faith-based organizations, business leaders, and philanthropies. In addition, SEAs are now expected to communicate directly with teachers and local teachers associations to provide information about new reform efforts.

See the *Solutions* #5 supplement, *Stakeholder_Communications_Tool_BSCP* (Microsoft™ Excel tool), and use the "Prioritization" tab to capture a list of key stakeholders in your state as they pertain to important reform initiatives. Additional Instructions for using the tool are on the first tab of the tool labeled "Instructions".

Although SEA leaders can generate a long list of important stakeholder groups that are engaged with education, it is certainly not practical, necessary, affordable or feasible to engage with all stakeholder groups with the same level of intensity all of the time.

Analyze and Classify Stakeholders

Given the effort that is required for the SEA to reach stakeholders across the state, it will be important to take additional steps to analyze and classify the stakeholder groups. SEAs will need to rely on staff and/or other partners that have knowledge and insights about the stakeholders that have been identified.

Classification may require collecting additional information to analyze stakeholders in order to understand their level of satisfaction with the SEA and new reform efforts, their current practices, their sphere of influence and reach, as well as each stakeholder's level of influence as it relates to the SEA. For example, stakeholder analysis could include the development and delivery of online surveys which may be a more cost effective manner to capture information from a wider group;

[2] Harrison, J S., & St. John, C. H. (1994). *Strategic management of organizations and stakeholders*. St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co.

conducting virtual focus groups; conducting interviews with organization leaders and directly reaching out to trusted partners who may have firsthand knowledge about key stakeholders which may result in more reliable insights.

The analysis should yield key information such as:

- key issues and areas of interest to these stakeholders;
- an assessment of their capacity and reach;
- their preferred channels of communications; and
- *their influence on others* and, just as important, *who they are influenced by*.

The stakeholder analysis should assist in the classification and prioritization by assessing the significance of this education policy issue to each stakeholder group from their perspective, and vice versa. This will help a SEA better determine how much attention each stakeholder group requires. It is important to keep in mind that stakeholders and their interests change over time, and the level of importance they place on an education issue can change as well. Therefore, it is essential to monitor stakeholder priorities on a regular basis, typically in the fall and spring, and in advance of legislative activities. This must occur for both proponents and opponents of any SEA area of focus.

The following stakeholder group descriptions can be used to guide the SEA communications team on how to classify the stakeholders into four groups based on their attributes as described below[3]

Active and Supportive—"Advocate"

This is the group that the SEA wants involved in supportive actions such as third party endorsements, letter-writing campaigns, attending functions, influencing their network and overall championing the common core state standards. Messages should be action- and behavior-oriented such as asking them to serve as surrogates and spokespersons to media and other groups. These individuals and groups need to be continually cultivated, informed and recognized. One of a SEA's goals in working with this group should be to build a base of

> An example of an *advocate* stakeholder group is Advance Illinois which consists of advocacy groups, parent groups, and other coalitions being actively engaged by the Illinois' Governor's Office, its State Board of Education, its Community College Board, and its Board of Higher Education in the implementation of the common core standards. Advance Illinois can be viewed as an example of an "active and supportive" advocate stakeholder group that is being proactive by preparing the public for possible "negative" changes in student proficiency standards that may come as a result of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

[3] Bowen, S. A., Rawlins, B., & Martin, T. (n.d.). *Mastering public relations* (v. 1.0). Created by Flat World Knowledge and licensed as CC-BY-NC-SA.

institutional memory so that the support base remains strong even as individual advocates come and go.

It is important for the SEA communications team to work directly with advocate stakeholders by providing them with the talking points, tool kits and other information to act as messengers and champions in their respective communities. For example, if the SEA has identified or formed a coalition of business leaders that can serve as advocate stakeholders, the SEA should provide them the talking points and information these advocate stakeholders will need to inform and engage with other stakeholders in their realm of influence such as elected officials, fellow business owners, customers and even their employees. Actively engaging and utilizing advocate stakeholders can be helpful, especially to SEA communication's offices with limited resources.

Inactive and Supportive—"Dormant"

This is a group that isn't ready to be involved. If inactivity is due to lack of knowledge, messages should focus on creating awareness and understanding of how the new reforms directly or indirectly affects them. It will be important to determine what is causing their inactivity, whether there is a real or perceived inability to use effective communication channels, or if messaging needs to change to create a stronger emotional connection to how education standards and assessments can impact them or their communities.

An example of common manifestations of dormant stakeholders can be found in the small and medium size business communities. These organizations are infrequently involved in advocacy work as compared to their large counterparts which often contain large philanthropic units. Although many small business and medium size business owners are well informed and interested in areas of concern for SEAs, they are not engaged by traditional channels of communication. In order to engage these stakeholders SEAs must ensure engagement of the specialized organizations. For instance, area manufacturing organizations often have many small and medium sized employers as members, yet they are infrequently engaged by those outside of the specialized economic sector. Timing and persistence will be the key in working with this group.

Active and Non-supportive—"Resistant"

The initial response to this group is to go on the attack by justifying and defending the new assessment standards. However, defensive messaging may not work on this group; it may only entrench them in their position and make them feel more justified and confident about their opposition. In this case, it may be best to try to address differences and seek to engage these stakeholders privately instead of engaging in a public disagreement. It may be difficult, but a SEA may want to assess how it can make relationships with resistant stakeholders more positive. In a situation like this, a SEA may want to determine if its advocate stakeholders or even its dormant stakeholders can serve as "honest brokers" and help bridge those gaps.

It is important to recognize and identify the differences between resistant stakeholders. It is a natural response to regard these stakeholders as a united front in opposition to an SEA's reform.

In doing so, an SEA could erroneously engage these stakeholders in a uniform fashion, and that would be a mistake. Resistant Stakeholders are as varied as Advocate Stakeholders, and an SEA needs to analyze and research each one as an independent agent of change. For instance, without examining if resistant stakeholders are organized versus disorganized, a SEA may become trapped into the pitfall of focusing too much on the so called "squeaky wheel." Utilizing the same methodology used to find advocate stakeholders will help a SEA to identify the more influential resistant stakeholders to engage.

Inactive and Non-supportive—"Apathetic"

It may be easy to take this group for granted. Nonetheless, it will be important to monitor apathetic stakeholders since they may not be in a permanent state of apathy as more awareness and visibility is given to the new assessment standards. It will be important for a SEA to be prepared to inform and actively invite this group to be positively engaged and involved in a supportive manner. The ideal progression for this group would be for it to evolve from apathetic to dormant to advocate, but certainly not to resistant.

Apathetic stakeholders are traditionally the most difficult to monitor, because they are not active or vocal. Additionally, they can come from multiple stakeholder categories such as retirees who don't have children in the school system and may not perceive themselves as being affected or having a role in education matters. Apathetic stakeholders make it difficult to focus resources and engagement strategies. Rather than utilizing limited communications resources on apathetic stakeholders, it is best to engage in consistent, quality monitoring of the strategy as a whole. It is important to reiterate that apathetic stakeholders are not necessarily in a permanent state of disengagement. They are often moved to engagement by media, community voices, activists, and other special interest groups that are making their voices heard. If the SEA monitors these voices they will be able to recognize shifts in trends amongst this notoriously difficult stakeholder group to track.

> See the *Solutions* #5 supplement, *Stakeholder_Communications_Tool_BSCP* (Microsoft™ Excel tool), and use the "Classification" tab to document highlights from the stakeholder analysis activities and classify stakeholders into the four categories outlined above. Additional instructions for using the tool are on the first tab of the tool labeled "Instructions".

Prioritizing Stakeholders

Once the SEA identifies and classifies its key stakeholders, it is important to use these classifications to inform the prioritization process. Borrowing from some aspects of Brad L. Rawlins' model[4] for prioritizing stakeholders based on his review of the literature in stakeholder theory and stakeholder management, we recommend a process that:

[4] Rawlins, B. L. (2006). *Prioritizing Stakeholders for Public Relations*. Provo, UT: Department of Communications, Brigham Young University.

- Identifies all potential stakeholders according to their relationship to the organization or, in this case, to the State Education Agency.
- Prioritizes stakeholders by attributes.
- Prioritizes stakeholders by relationship to the situation or, in this case, implementing new education reforms.

With a prioritization plan, a SEA will be able to make better use of its time and resources including budget and partnerships. Two key stakeholder attributes that can be useful in determining how to prioritize and engage stakeholders are: **power/influence** and **interest**.[5]

Stakeholders have power when they can:

- Influence others (groups or individuals) to make decisions they would not have otherwise made.
- Have an impact on a SEA's ability to implement new education reforms.

It's important to assess ahead of time the risks associated with poorly engaging these kinds of powerful stakeholders. For example, a group of stakeholders who are very dissatisfied may be a small group, but may have the power to disrupt and prevent the SEA from achieving its goals. When combined with their influence, a SEA may decide to give them a higher priority on its communications stakeholder plan.

The power and interest diagram[6] (to the right, and described below) illustrates the classification and prioritization from "key players" to "minimal effort" based on the stakeholders' levels of power and interest as it relates to the implementation of education reforms.

- ***Key players:*** Stakeholders with high power and high level of interest are considered "key players" and should be given priority consideration. More than likely these key players will also fall into the classification of an advocate stakeholder, but be aware that oppositional stakeholders may also be key players.

[5] Bryson, J. M. (1995). *Strategic planning for public and non-profit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement*. New York: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
[6] Bryson, 1995.

- ***Keep satisfied:*** Stakeholders with high power but a low level of interest can prove to be very challenging in maintaining relationships or partnerships. A SEA must always be prepared for this, because despite their lack of interest in general, they might exercise their power in reaction to a particular initiative. They may use their power in order to inhibit change or could become a strong ally. This is very much the case with those groups or individuals whom have been classified as dormant stakeholders. In some cases, the media may fall into this category as there are always other stories and news that may compete and distract from their constant coverage of education issues. Nonetheless, the media's ability to reach broad audiences puts them in a position of high power.

- ***Keep informed:*** Stakeholders with low power and a high level of interest may not require immediate action but they should be kept informed and monitored carefully. For example, in the case of less organized parents, community-based organizations (CBOs) and some faith-based leaders, they may rely on their local school teachers and principals as trusted sources of how state or federal policies impact their schools. Therefore it is important to make sure that these groups have ready access to information that is culturally and linguistically relevant to them.

- ***Minimal effort:*** Stakeholders with low power and a low level of interest do not require immediate action. Nonetheless, a SEA must be aware of stakeholders in this category as their position may change.

While this quantitative approach may not capture all of the nuances and attributes of the stakeholders, it may help identify patterns that can provide deeper insights into stakeholder dynamics that may affect a SEA's efforts.

See the *Solutions* #5 supplement, *Stakeholder_Communications_Tool_BSCP* (Microsoft™ Excel tool), and use the "Prioritization" tab to assign a desired classification (either change or maintain) for key stakeholders in your state and indicate the ideal priority level (1–4) for communications efforts. Additional instructions for using the tool are on the first tab of the tool labeled.

Conclusion

An SEA's stakeholder prioritization process can help avoid the anxiety of how to inform and engage with what may seem to be an infinite number of groups who have interest in, or are affected by the implementation of new education reforms.[7,8] By following the three-step stakeholder analysis process, SEAs can determine whom to engage with and with what level of effort. These determinations can be integrated into the SEA's overall strategic communications plans.

[7] Dunham, L., Freeman, R. E., & Liedtaka, J. (2001). *The soft underbelly of stakeholder theory: The role of community*. Darden School Working Paper No. 01-22.

[8] Sternberg, E. (1999). The stakeholder concept: A mistaken doctrine. *Foundation for Business Responsibilities*, Issue Paper No. 4.

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