
COMMUNICATING CHANGE

A Tip Sheet from REvolutionizing Engineering and Computer Science Departments (RED) Participatory Action Research

Communicating change to various stakeholders is a critical aspect of change management. This tip sheet presents strategies that highlight research findings resulting from focus group discussions and conference calls with NSF's RED grantees. The quotes from research participants highlight these findings. For more information, contact redpar@rose-hulman.edu.

Listen Well

When given the opportunity to engage in authentic, supportive dialogue, stakeholders will happily provide their perspectives, feelings, needs, and constraints, to allow change agents to inform their work and create meaningful messages about the upcoming changes.

- ✓ **TIP: Use various strategies like formal or informal focus groups, facilitated group listening sessions, a question dropbox, or social media requests to listen to stakeholders.**

“To think about long lasting organizational change, you have to hear the voice of every person in that environment, the staff, the TAs, the administration...so while faculty are the drivers of the change [in our project], it will only be sustainable if everyone is on board.”

Create an Intentional Approach

Different stakeholders need to learn about different aspects of the project. Creating uniformity of core premises among various types of communications emphasizes the quality of the change effort while enabling nimble and flexible messaging.

- ✓ **TIP: Adopt strategies like core metaphors or imagery, a set of talking points with versions formulated for different audiences, and a communication calendar to create unified messaging.**

“I run in to the provost once every three weeks, and I have my talking points and my elevator pitch. It helps to be prepared. He needs to know the points very quickly.”

Acknowledge Shared Values

Successful change agents create opportunities to communicate the relationship between their change and the story and values of the department or institution - things like workforce preparation, service and stewardship, integrity, equity and justice, or faith.

- ✓ **TIP: Craft messages that communicate how change supports the shared values, how change aligns the organization's values to today's realities, and how change creates an opportunity to position the organization to enact shared values.**

“I think all of us want to know how can we make the engineering curriculum more inclusive, what can we do, and at the same time everybody still struggles with needing to cover core content, and if we do something else, will we lose that.”

Speak to Stakeholder Motivations

Change projects have numerous stakeholders, all with different interests in the process and outcome. Successful teams understand that motivations for participation in or resistance to change activities vary widely among these stakeholders, and that motivations are complex.

- ✓ **TIP: Frame the project in a manner that appeals to various motivations, to allow stakeholders to find elements of interest to them.**

“Some very research interested faculty got involved in thinking about this [project] as a research problem, for example, how do you make pre-work better, when is the in-class time, what type of sessions can you develop to test this? So turning the teaching into a research problem has gotten some of the faculty interested.”

Place Communication in Context

Change occurs in the context of the institution, discipline, and national landscape in higher education. Creating natural connections to these contexts helps stakeholders understand the larger picture and identifies points of synergy for communication efforts.

- ✓ **TIP: Emphasize connections to existing or planned efforts like strategic plans, major structural reorganizations, capital campaigns, national reports, disciplinary society position statements, or anticipated licensing changes.**

“The strategy we employed was to discuss the initiatives of the grant together with the institution initiatives that revolved around the strategic planning process...to come and talk about the strengths, weaknesses, threats as they related to the themes of changemaking and other strategic planning themes.

Expand the Team

High-functioning teams recognize that skills in communication expertise are required for forward motion of their change efforts. Communication expertise includes finding dissemination outlets, defining metaphors, creating documentation, and crafting rhetorical analyses of audiences.

- ✓ **TIP: Create a strong partnership with existing marketing and communications staff, hire a consultant to provide guidance on messaging and branding, or formally incorporate a communications specialist on the team.**

“[We have] a communications specialist who is not an engineer but trained in communication and she is part of our department and sees what we do but can communicate that to those outside the department. Using individuals who specialize in communication...that is a plus.”

