The Question

How can state education agencies be proactive and improve their effectiveness communicating with internal and external stakeholders?

SEA Strategic Communications: Making Communications More Proactive, Efficient, and Effective

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Over time, the role of state education agencies (SEAs) has shifted from a focus on low-profile compliance activities to more complex and politically charged tasks, requiring more thoughtful communications with all stakeholders. In response to this shift, SEAs have increased their communications capacity by creating communication divisions and executive leadership positions focused on managing agency information (i.e., a Chief Information Officer). While these help SEAs gain communication expertise to support their work, many SEAs report their communications still feel reactive, ad hoc, and unaligned with SEA plans. This Solutions piece explains basic strategic communication concepts and illustrates how the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has been applying these strategies over time.

What is Strategic Communications?

The BSCP Center (BSCP) and several Regional Comprehensive Centers are helping SEAs create systemic communication practices using strategic processes. Different than communication practices that focus primarily on external stakeholders, strategic communication is a holistic agency-wide process that starts with agency goals; meets the needs of internal and external stakeholders; focuses on clarity, alignment, and coordination; results in deliberate proactive agency messages; and uses a continuous improvement process. Strategic communications follow standard processes to deliver consistent messages to internal and external audiences. Draft messages are refined and adjusted based on audience feedback. Critical elements of strategic communication approaches

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include: executive-level leader involvement and support and a strong agency-wide commitment to consistent use of clearly defined processes to support intentional and effective communication. Below we share how the ADE has been making their communications more strategic over the past 5 years.

What Were Arkansas' Communication Challenges?

Since 2013, the communications division included a director, communications manager, webmaster, photographer/videographer, and a special projects manager. By 2016, ADE staff felt the agency was improving its communications, but still struggling with these challenges:

- An understaffed communications division.
- Divisions working and communicating in silos
- Staff perception that internal team meetings were too long and not productive
- An agency website that was improving but still disorganized
- Lack of a consistent process to request support from the communications division
- Lack of an effective communication plan
- Lack of consistent processes to support the plan

As one communications member shared, "We were pulled in so many directions that I just picked what needed to be done the most," which she described as a "pants on fire approach."

How is Arkansas Improving Their Communications Processes?

ADE began addressing their communication challenges in 2013 by focusing on their biggest needs first: improving the agency website and creating a consistent process for engaging the communications department. Since 2015, under the leadership of Commissioner Johnny Key, the communications department has used the agency's strategic planning process to make targeted improvements to their communication strategies and develop a communication plan focused on agency-wide goals. Key brought with him a strategic systems approach and strong commitments to improving communication, which included a focus on stakeholder feedback and input. Since then, the agency has built its capacity to clearly articulate its communication goals, translate those goals into actionable strategies, and implement and evaluate them.

Beginning in September 2015, with support from BSCP in using Strategic Performance Management (SPM) processes in partnership with the South Central Comprehensive Center (SC3), cross-divisional agency teams meet monthly to deepen their understanding of their vision, mission, values, and goals; develop and refine communication strategies, milestones, and action plans. Now, "Every conversation at some point includes a statement about the agency's vision." Below are details about ADE's approach to improving their communication.

Revising Communication Staff Roles

Arkansas' examination of their agency organization by structure and function through the SPM process greatly supported the agency's communication improvement process. Through the SPM approach, ADE staff decided to relocate a communications staff member working on the agency operations plan, to the division of fiscal and administrative services. The remaining open communication position was reimagined and the division was able to hire a former Arkansas Teacher of the Year with a communication and marketing background to serve as a lead writer of positive district stories and social media strategist. This enabled ADE to better meet their communications goals and make more efficient use of staff.

Revising the Agency Website

ADE's website is a key channel for communicating information to internal and external stakeholders. As one ADE executive leader stated, "Our commitment to transparency to stakeholders is only valid if stakeholders can find the information on the website." When we first asked ADE about their communications processes, staff said the website was difficult to navigate and created more questions than answers.

We also found divisions were developing their own webpages, which was problematic because information was inconsistent and confusing to stakeholders. To address the organization and process challenges, ADE updated and reorganized their website so that information was easier to find. As part of the process, ADE focused on items that were most used by the public based on initial homepage clicks, and redesigned the webpages to be more engaging and clear.

ADE also improved their process for updating their website. Rather than divisions managing their own pages and content, ADE's webmaster, located within the communications division, gathers updates from designated staff members in each division. Agency leaders also designated team members within each division to make changes once approved by their division leader. Changes are logged in a Google Doc and posted in a central location for easy access by staff. Bi-monthly newsletters informing stakeholders about website updates are distributed internally and externally. (See http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/communications/ newsletters.) The result of ADE's website improvements is an appealing, informative, and user-friendly website (see http://www.arkansased.gov/).

Engaging the Communications Department

As recently as 2017, the communication division did not have formal processes for other divisions to solicit their help or determine priorities. Instead, people directed requests for photography, videography, or web design services to individuals, rather than to a central point of contact. Lack of a formal process led to the communications division agreeing to take on too many projects, impeding their progress on implementing the agency's communication agenda. Now communications requests are sent to the agency leadership team who help decide which projects to implement. Then, projects are led by assistant commissioners who coordinate with the communications director to plan project components, including how each project supports the agency's strategic plan and whether or how existing projects will be impacted by new initiatives.

In addition to establishing priorities, the division improved its project approach. For example, even though program staff like using videos, some project objectives were better served by a brochure. To specify an approach for each project, the communications team meets with relevant program staff to discuss the project scope, assignments, and timeline using newly developed

templates to ensure decisions are made collaboratively and projects are well-designed from the outset. This reduced surprises and misunderstanding among project leads. An important recent lesson learned from a college-readiness communication campaign revealed that weekly meetings between communication and program staff helped keep the work consistent and on track between the different divisions.

Improving External and Internal Communications

ADE uses several communication strategies to update internal and external stakeholders. In the past, ADE posted monthly video updates called Key Points, featuring Commissioner Key conveying policy changes, upcoming events, and student accomplishments. Although the videos provided an opportunity for the Commissioner and other staff to be seen in a supportive role, a review of related metrics showed few people viewed the videos, raising questions about the value of using resources to produce them. As an alternative, beginning in January 2018, ADE started producing short, one-to-two minute video clips called "Fill you in Friday." Instead of writing scripts and using a videographer, ADE posted cell phone videos to social media channels. The result was more viewers of videos that cost less money and time to produce (see https://www.facebook.com/arkansased/videos/10156590260197788/).

ADE also improved their process for updating internal staff. For the past 3 years, ADE provided internal updates through face-to-face meetings called Communications Connections. To make updates more accessible, ADE now live streams these sessions and others to all ADE team members and schedules update releases for the Monday following each state board meeting. In addition, ADE posts recordings of live stream events to the agency intranet for team members who are not available to attend the live streamed event.

Supporting the Change/Improvement Process

ADE's strategic approach enabled them to organize, review, and improve ways of targeting their communications as they systematically linked message content with agency goals and strategies, divisions, and stakeholders. One of the most challenging parts of managing change is supporting implementation.

To address the agency's communication needs, ADE created a communication plan to outline how different divisions communicate and the processes they used

to update the website and disseminate messages via social media. This year, the communications department will refine and continue to implement the plan, which includes a focus on the use of social media. Specific action steps tied to milestones make it easier for team members to understand the communication plan and how to implement new processes.

ADE also receives professional learning and coaching from BSCP and SC3 (centers within the Comprehensive Center Network) to support their change process. For example, the SC3 technical assistance coordinator for Arkansas speaks monthly with the communication director to discuss what to include in their plan and progress toward achieving milestones, and to identify possible refinements to increase communication effectiveness and efficiency.

Conclusion

ADE has made great strides toward improving their communications strategies and better organizing, implementing, and adjusting their work. When asked how they did it, leaders credit the importance of thinking strategically and integrating strategic communication processes with other functions, like strategic performance management and accepting that supporting change/improvement is a continuous process. Had ADE approached improving communications without aligning their plan with the agency's vision and agenda, they would have missed key connections needed to achieve their vision. ADE will continue refining its communications, including improving agency webpages, cross-division communication campaigns, social media strategies, and gathering metrics and stakeholder feedback to ensure that communications approaches are aligned with and supportive of agency goals. ADE staff have said the more they reflect and improve, the more they can see their past mistakes. Under the leadership of Commissioner Key and with the support of BSCP, the agency now has processes, tools, and support to continuously reflect on how effective their communications strategies are for achieving ADE's goals.

About BCPS

The Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center) focuses on helping state education agencies (SEAs) throughout the country, as they adapt to reduced fiscal resources and increased demands for greater productivity. As State Departments of Education are facing a daunting challenge of improving student performance with diminishing financial resources, the BSCP Center provides technical assistance to SEAs that builds their capacity to support local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, and to the 21 regional and content comprehensive centers that serve them, by providing high quality information, tools, and implementation support. The partners in the BSCP Center are Edvance Research, Inc., the Academic Development Institute (ADI), the Centeron Reinventing Public Education (University of Washington), and the Edunomics Lab (Georgetown University). Solutions emerges from specific questions or problems facing an SEA that arise during the work of the BSCP Center with the SEA in a consultancy. It represents information that is highly responsive to an SEA's practical needs. The writing of a Solutions issue is also stimulated by questions from Comprehensive Centers or SEAs regarding the use of a BSCP Center tool, the application of a new concept, or an implementation challenge.

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