



Governance Tips

Helping you stay on track

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Good Communication - the key to success

An essential contributor to good governance is good communication. Clear communication is one of the essential requirements for groups to work together.

Communication between individuals or groups is a very complex process. The way people communicate has a big impact on relationships and how things are done. Communication styles are determined by culture, values, beliefs, attitudes and thoughts about the particular topic.

Open, honest and respectful communication is important for healthy relationships. Good communication can help avoid conflict and to solve problems.

Communication can be verbal, written or non verbal and in any communication at least some of the "meaning" is lost in simple transmission of a message from the sender to the receiver. Misunderstandings, different interpretations of words and actions are common and the message that is heard is often far different than the one intended. This can lead to conflict if not dealt with appropriately and clarified.

Written communication provides a permanent record (paper trail) of discussions, decisions and information. However care should be taken with all written communication that the message is not misinterpreted by the reader, as the intent of written communication is not always clear and can easily be misinterpreted as being harsher than the writer intended.

Correspondence: Letters and emails sent on behalf of the organisation should first be approved by the committee.

Minutes: Care should be taken with the recording of minutes of meetings as they are a legal document and can be used as evidence in a court of law. They should accurately reflect the discussions and decisions of the meeting and it is important that they are checked for accuracy at the following meeting before being accepted. It is not necessary to record everything that is said but minutes should be comprehensive enough for someone who did not attend the meeting to have a clear understanding of what took place. Discussions and decisions regarding sensitive or confidential issues

should be recorded in a separate section which is not made available to those outside the committee.

Non-verbal communication includes such things as body language and tone and is an important component of communication; in fact it can provide more meaning to a message than the verbal.

Good **listening skills** are vital for effective communication. To be a good listener it is important to:

- **Be attentive.**
 - Listen in silence.
 - Don't interrupt or allow yourself to be distracted.
 - Make a brief mental summary of the conversation as you go along.
 - Slow down your internal thoughts and concentrate on the speaker's message.
 - Make eye contact with the speaker.
 - Use reassuring body language such as nods and head tilts.
 - Keep your emotions under control.
 - Try to identify with the speaker.
- **Pause before you reply.** Don't jump right in as soon as the person takes a breath. Allow a few seconds of silence to exist. The "pause" phase is especially important if the person you are listening to is excited, angry or unhappy.
- **Ask questions for clarification.** Don't assume you know exactly what was meant. Ask "How do you mean...?" or "What does that mean exactly?"
- **Say it in your own words.** This is the proof that you were really paying attention.

(adapted from, **Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn** (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2008), Mary Renck Jalongo, and recommendations from Brian Tracy and Ron Arden in the **Work & Family Life newsletter** (July 2008))

It is critical to understand the process of communication, understand and be aware of the potential sources of errors and constantly counteract these tendencies by making a conscientious effort to make sure there is a minimal loss of meaning in your conversation.

PROGRAM PARTNERS



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Hints for effective communication in early childhood organisations:

- A **philosophy** which been developed in consultation with the members and encompasses the values and beliefs of the organisation will provide a clear direction for those responsible for the management of the organisation. Display the philosophy in a prominent place in the centre and regularly communicate it to members.
 - **Policies** provide consistent and clear direction for the decisions and activities of the organisation. Policies and procedures should reflect the organisation's philosophy and be reviewed regularly to ensure they meet current needs and legislation
 - **Clearly defined roles and responsibilities** are essential in all organisations. Confusion and conflict can quickly occur when there is a misunderstanding about a person's role or responsibility. Comprehensive and clearly articulated job descriptions should be available for all committee members. It is also important that the committee has a clear understanding of their role in relation to staff and any external bodies for example local government, cluster manager.
 - **Service agreements and terms of reference** should be developed whenever there are shared responsibilities between groups or when authority for decisions and actions is passed on to another group or individual. They should clearly define:
 - Roles and responsibilities of each party.
 - Specific tasks.
 - The scope of each party's authority.
 - Accountability and reporting requirements.
 - Any time limit on the agreement.
 - A comprehensive **handover** of information to new committees or individual committee members is essential for all committees. An understanding of historical practices and the basis on which past decisions were made will assist in a smooth transition and continuity of governance for the new committee.
 - Committees and those delegated with authority are **accountable** to the members and keeping members **informed** of the activities and decisions of the committee will assist in developing confidence and support for the management body.
 - Members of an incorporated association are entitled to view the minutes of meetings, however, usually a brief summary of discussions and decisions displayed on the noticeboard or short newsletter after a meeting can be useful methods for keeping members informed.
 - Reports and meeting papers provided prior to meetings will give committee members an opportunity to think about any issues or questions they may have, or to do some research of their own. This will enable the committee members to participate in effective discussions and to make informed decisions.
- Committees should develop processes for members to provide feedback or ask questions from the committee, for example a suggestion box near the sign in book, social events to meet the committee, an open meeting once a term or inviting members to put their ideas or concerns in writing to the secretary for inclusion on the agenda.
 - To support efficient meetings and confidentiality, only committee members should attend committee meetings. However, occasionally someone may wish to speak directly to the committee and a clear process should be developed for this. Generally the request is put in writing to the president/secretary and is placed first on the agenda. Once the presentation is completed and the committee has clarified any questions they may have, the person would leave and the committee would continue with the meeting.
- **A code of conduct or ethics** based on respect provides guidelines for appropriate communication between all members of the organisation.
 - **Decision making** requires effective communication.

It is important that those responsible for making decisions:

 - Are able to contribute to discussion.
 - Listen to other points of view.
 - Feel confident that they have all the information they need to make an informed decision.
 - Communicate the decision to all the relevant people.

Once a decision has been made all members abide by the decision regardless of their position on the issue.

Remember the basic principles of communication are to:

- Use open ended and close ended questions appropriately.
- Use eye contact, encouraging gestures.
- Focus on the situation, issue, behavior, not the person.
- Maintain the self-confidence and self-esteem of others.
- Maintain constructive relationships with your employees, peers, managers.
- Use active listening techniques such as stating your understanding of what you are hearing.
- Make sure you summarize.
- Lead by example.

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