

U.S ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION VIDEO  
TRAINING PROGRAM**

PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

MODULE 7.  
**COMMUNICATING WITH  
STAKEHOLDERS**



**PUBLIC  
PARTICIPATION**  

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**GUIDE**

*Engage the public. Preserve the planet.*

## Introduction

The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeable, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.

– Sydney J. Harris

Communicating in a public participation context is really no different than other forms of communication. People are people, and understanding human behavior can help us to be more effective communicators.

The good news is that human nature can generally be predicted. The hard part is that communication within public participation is complex because we are often dealing with highly emotional issues and communicating with a wide range of stakeholders.

### Sections in Module 7:

1. Communicating with Your Stakeholders
2. Stakeholder Communication Behaviors and Skills
3. Key Messages

## SECTION 1:

# Communicating with Your Stakeholders

When planning for communication, it is important to take into account the circumstances, audiences, and issues that are present in our project. Consider the following as you plan communication on your project:

- **There is no single public.** “The public” does not exist, we communicate with diverse stakeholders who have very different perspectives and concerns.
- **People have strong opinions.** We are almost always dealing with high controversy and high emotion.
- **The issues are not always simple.** The projects and choices may be complex and have highly technical components that are not familiar to many of our stakeholders.
- **You are not the only ones providing information.** The sources of information in the community are diverse, and some can be highly biased toward a particular point of view.
- **It can be hard to get people’s attention.** Most of our stakeholders are already inundated with information about things that concern and interest them.

Communicating with your stakeholders requires more than just public meetings, fact sheets, or web sites. Three key components are important for effective communication:

1. **Information sharing:** all public participation requires good communication of detailed information. Create the kind of foundational information about your programs that can be reused consistently over time. The channels of sharing this information also matter. To be most effective, we should find channels and approaches for communication that stakeholders trust and are comfortable with.
2. **Relationships:** think about all the key stakeholders that should be working with you as a sponsor agency and should be working with each other. Use every opportunity to build and strengthen those relationships as you move through your public participation program. Not everyone can be a successful communicator, and we need to choose staff who can relate to our stakeholders and build the rapport and trust necessary to communicate well.
3. **Dialogue:** true two-way communication is necessary for productive interaction and decision-making. Sponsoring agencies need to model the behavior they wish to see in their stakeholders and create the kind of spaces where people can interact successfully.

## 1.1

# Six Basic Truths of Stakeholder Communication

Let's start by talking about some fundamental principles in public communication. There are five unavoidable truths that are important to creating a strong foundation to your approach to communication.

**1. It's not what you say, it's what they hear that matters.**

You need to understand how you are being perceived and what your messages actually mean to your audience. What we think we are communicating can be dramatically misunderstood. If we are not aware of how the public is receiving our information, it can completely undermine our efforts.

**2. People listen in the context of how they view the world.**

When we create messages, we craft them in the context of our own views, knowledge, and experiences. Obviously then, people will interpret our messages based on how they see the world. The better we listen to our stakeholders and understand our stakeholders, the more effective we will be in creating information that will be understood. We need to be careful not to go too fast or talk above our audience. We need to shape our information to connect to their real lives, their concerns, and their existing levels of knowledge.

**3. High levels of emotion affect what people hear.**

Insecurity, defensiveness, self-doubt, conflict, and fear all lead to poor listening and make communication difficult.

**4. People don't resist change, they resist being changed.**

People are more receptive to change when they participate in the change process. We need to listen first and show that the community is important to us.

**5. The credibility of the message depends on the credibility of the messenger.**

Your relationship and history with the audience, your overall honesty, the timing of your communication, and the circumstances under which you share information all matter. There is an important saying in public participation that states "I don't care how much you know, until I know how much you care."

## 1.2 Characteristics of Transparent Communication

A study at a major University looked at a wide variety of public participation projects to understand what constitutes effective communication. The study identified 10 characteristics that showed a very high statistical correlation with the success of the communication and community trust in the program and agency. (more information on this study can be found at <http://authenticcommunication.info> )

1. **Truthful** – is honest, accurate
2. **Fundamental** – tells the core story, the real issues, what is important
3. **Comprehensive** – tells the whole story
4. **Consistent** – matches the organization’s other words and actions
5. **Clear** – uses lay language, is logical, well organized and uses examples
6. **Relevant** – addresses publics’ interests and issues
7. **Accessible** – is easily found, is easily understood
8. **Timely** – is provided early enough for action or feedback
9. **Shows care** – is compassionate of loss and public’s interests, concerns, and emotions
10. **Allows feedback** – creates opportunities for discussion, feedback and information exchange



## SECTION 2: Stakeholder Communication Behaviors and Skills

### Stakeholder Communication Behaviors

Ultimately, it is how agency staff behave that determines the success or failure of public participation and convinces others to participate in a meaningful way. ***Behavior of the sponsoring agency will set the tone for the entire process.*** These behaviors cannot be faked; they must represent the sincere intent of the agency to build and implement effective public participation programs and foster sincere and positive relationships with stakeholders.

Important behaviors for public participation include the following:

- **Transparency** to open up the process and allow all of the parties to understand how decisions are being made and the information that is being considered, and to approach stakeholders as colleagues.
- **Openness** to different stakeholders, ideas, input, and ways of working with people and the ability to demonstrate genuine friendliness and empathy toward others.
- **Humility** that allows us to suspend judgment and assumptions, value the contributions of others, and take the attitude of a learner.
- **Respect** for individuals, for their experience, points of view, emotions, and needs, and provide validation of stakeholder experience and values.
- **Honesty** to always provide truthful and timely information and demonstrate a high level of personal integrity.
- **Reliability** to put forth the effort it takes to make a participatory process work and to do what you promise.
- **Flexibility** to recognize that you cannot predict all contingencies in advance and will have to adjust the process as you proceed.
- **Resiliency** to move the process forward even through difficult and controversial circumstances.

## Stakeholder Communication Skills

Effective communication is the foundation of any public participation program. The ability to create and distribute effective information, develop meaningful relationships, and listen to public input is essential.

The basic communication skills required for any successful public participation project include:

- **Write Plainly.** The ability to create clear and concise written messages in plain language.
- **Use Graphics.** The ability to combine words and graphics to make difficult and complex issues understandable to a lay audience.
- **Speak Clearly.** The ability to present information to large audiences in a comfortable and understandable way. The ability to create effective visual information that assists the audience's understanding.
- **Build Rapport.** The ability to relate to people in face-to-face situations, to make them feel comfortable and secure, and to exhibit key public participation behaviors at all times.
- **Create Visual Information.** Using all possible tools to assist the community's understanding.
- **Listen Deeply** The ability to focus on the speaker and portray the behaviors that provide them with the time and safety needed to be heard and understood.



## SECTION 3:

# Key Messages

Key messages help to explain those things that every stakeholder needs to know and understand.

Key messages need to be simple, straightforward, concise and repeated constantly in a variety of venues so that they reach all of our stakeholders.

**Consider the three parts of any good message:**

### 1. Facts (what is it)

- What does everyone need to know and understand?
- What are the clear boundaries or constraints on an issue?
- How does this issue or process work?
- What are the roles and responsibilities associated with it?

### 2. Ramifications (why is it important)

- What are the possible outcomes or choices?
- What does this mean to the agency, community, or individual groups?
- What are the fears that will not be realized?

### 3. Relevance (why should I care)

- How does this relate to specific interest groups?
- How do we engage the voices we are seeking?
- Why is their participation valuable to them and to us?



## GROUP EXERCISE

### Key Messages

Think back to your case study.

1. Identify three to five key messages that all stakeholders need to know.
2. Identify the language you would use to communicate these messages and how you would make sure they reached all necessary audiences.