Tips For Effective Communications

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The *IT Infrastructure Library* (ITIL®) requires IT to communicate clearly internally and externally. For example *Operating Level Agreements* (OLAs) and *Service Level Agreements* (SLAs) are examples of stakeholder communications. However, most IT communications are complex and so full of jargon they force stakeholders to wade through irrelevant information, driving them away instead of engaging them. Engaging communications require you know your audience and present your message in ways that keep your reader's interest. Yes, our reports get read and you have readers!

Luckily, proven methods for engaging communications already exist...in journalism! IT can benefit from the classic journalist's mantra of "Who, What, Where, When, Why and How?" Using some journalism tips we can create effective and compelling IT communications!

Following we examine how to begin crafting *IT Service Management* (ITSM) communications that meet process requirements while engaging stakeholders.

The first step in organizing a Communication Plan is to understand who your audience is and define your plan to meet their needs. Remember that communications is, by definition, a two-way process. It encompasses not only information traveling from IT to other parties, but information coming into IT from these sources as well.

It is important at this stage to understand the relationship between "Who" and "How." "Who" is the entity with whom you are communicating; "How" is the channel you use to disseminate that information.

For example, the Configuration Management process generally does not communicate a new procedure directly to the Users; it relies upon the Service Desk, as the single point of contact between IT and the Users, to inform the Users of the change. Thus, in this case, the Configuration Management plan would identify "Who" it should communicate the new procedure to, and it would identify the Service Desk as "How" the new procedure will be communicated. The Service Desk would communicate the procedure to all appropriate staff via appropriate channels and in the appropriate format.

Likewise, *Service Level Agreements* (SLA) and *Operating Level Agreements* (OLA) reflect the media through which IT communicates critical agreements to the Business and to internal IT operating groups.

Within ITSM and ITIL, we find many guidelines that help identify the important audiences for your Communications Plan.

Service Desk and Incident Management. As the single point of contact between IT and the User, the Service Desk has the obvious mandate of understanding "Who" its audience is. Naturally, it communicates "externally" to the organization's Users, taking care to understand who comprises its User communities. Are they the Users of a particular application or piece of hardware, personnel at a particular physical site, corporate management, all personnel, or an individual department?

Problem Management. Problem Management has a particularly interesting need for communications, as it works with

a wide mix of groups and organizations. On the process side, it communicates with the Service Desk/Incident Management and Configuration Management. Internal to IT, it communicates with the various technical support groups in IT Operations and Networking, and externally, it communicates with vendors and service suppliers.

Configuration Management. Although Configuration Management is not a "user-facing" process, it has strong communications requirements, through the Service Desk, to ensure that everyone in the organization knows and understands the Configuration Management policies and procedures. In addition, its close working relationships with all of the IT Service Management processes means that the constituencies of those processes and the underlying IT support groups are high on its "Who" list.

Change Management. The most frequent object of Change Management communications is the *Change Advisory Board* (CAB) itself, as it communicates CAB agendas, plans, and schedules between members. It also frequently communicates with IT and Business Management, as well as all of the other processes. Two very important audiences are the Service Desk (and ultimately the Users) for the *Forward Schedule of Changes* (FSC) and *Projected Service Availability* (PSA) and Release Management for planning and control of the release of new *Configuration Items* (CIs) into the live infrastructure.

Release Management. Release Management directs most of its communications at internal audiences, including Configuration Management, Change Management, Applications Management, and IT technical support groups.

Service Level Management. The lynchpin of the Service Delivery processes, Service Level Management revolves around communications. It speaks directly to Business Management, and, through *Service Level Agreements* (SLAs), to the wide range of Users within an organization. Equally important, are its communications ties to IT Operations through *Operating Level Agreements* (OLAs). On the process side, it communicates directly with all of the processes, with the possible exception of Release Management.

Availability Management. Two important communications links for Availability Management are Service Level Management and the Service Desk, and it has direct relationships with most of the other processes as well. It also communicates directly to Business Management, Applications Management, IT technical support groups, and to external IT vendors and service providers.

Capacity Management. Capacity Management maintains formal communications links with Service Level Management, the Service Desk and the *Change Advisory Board* (CAB). As part of its daily operations, it communicates on an on-going basis with Applications Development, Business management, and IT product and service vendors.

IT Service Continuity Management. As documented in the ITIL, IT Service Continuity Management operates within the context of *Business Continuity Management* (BCM). Therefore, it maintains very strong communications with all aspects of Business Continuity Management, including Executives involved in Strategic Planning, the Steering Committee, Senior Management, and BCM Recovery Teams. On the IT side, it communicates with IT technical support groups, IT recovery teams, recovery facilities, vendors, and service suppliers. During times of emergency, it will communicate to Users via the Service Desk.

Financial Management. No one likes to pay bills, and they especially do not like to pay them if they do not understand them. The role of communications in the Financial Management world is to inform the Business side about the cost of IT Services in language that the Business can relate to. Financial Management, of course, communicates with IT management, corporate financial and accounting staff, Service Level Management, Capacity Management, IT Service Continuity Management, Capacity Management, and general IT Management.

Who's Who? At the start of any Communications Plan, it is well worth it to take the time to determine who needs to know about the topic or the change. Don't forget that intra-communication within the IT department can be just as important as mass communications to the Business and Users. Also, keep in mind that different parts of the Business, such as general staff or Senior Management may, at times, have very different communications needs.

The classic journalist's mantra of "Who, What, Where, When, Why and How?" continues to provide the critical underpinnings for successful communications — especially today in IT Service Management.

We've taken a brief look at "Who?" in this article. Look for "What?", "Where?", "When?", "Why?", and "How?" in future issues of DITY.