

PILOTING A NEW COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATIONS WORKSHOP



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So, what could be the communications problems that will impact on Combined Authorities and other major collaborative transformation projects?

That was the challenge posed to a group of programme and communications managers at the pilot of a new SSA workshop called ‘*Managing Communications for Collaboration Projects*’.

Good communications between partners, and with key stakeholders, are recognised as the glue that holds successful partnerships together and there is clear evidence that, where projects fail, this is often due to a lack of effective communications.

Using a new version of the ‘*poison and antidote*’ tool¹ the delegates at the pilot workshop came up with the following main challenges to successful partnership communications...

Just comms it up a bit!

Communications teams are often brought into the collaborative journey far too late to have a real influence or impact. The partnership may have been formed and the business case written well before the leadership team decides “*we just need a press release or a quick partnership website*”.

But the real value comes in involving communications professionals and the project leads to deliver the right communications activities from the start, helping to shape the partnership’s messages and how it is perceived by service users and staff.

Sarah can spend Tuesday afternoons working on this...

Your collaboration programme is a multi-million pound project affecting people across a wide area – yet often the communications are left to a junior comms officer who has a couple of hours spare a week.

The challenge is that resourcing communications is a real problem for many partnerships, as it’s often seen as just an extra demand on already hard-pressed communications services.

The challenge identified at the workshop was how to make the case to the leadership team for proper resourcing of partnership comms, whether through a service level agreement with one of the partners or bringing in a dedicated resource.

What’s the story?

One of the big challenges identified at the workshop was how to make sure that all the partners were telling the same story. The lack of a consistent story often comes from the absence of a shared communications plan across all the partners. The workshop tried out a new tool which could be used to co-create a shared communications plan.

Unequal balance of partnerships

‘All partnerships are equal but some are more equal than others’ (to misquote *Animal Farm*).

There’s always a big danger that one partner can be seen as dominating the partnership. It could be that they are the biggest player in the partnership, have the biggest personalities or have the best resourced communications team.

The end result is that the smaller partners can perceive a takeover, or the other partners don’t feel they are getting due credit for their role. Genuine partnership communications can help avoid this.

It’s not a big deal for us

One point raised in the workshop was ‘*what you do when the collaboration is a bigger deal for one partner than others?*’

But the real value comes in involving communications professionals and the project leads to deliver the right communications activities from the start, helping to shape the partnership’s messages and how it is perceived by service users and staff.

¹ See Tool T&VI.06 “What Could Possibly Go Wrong?”

Having identified these challenges, the rest of the session was spent looking at a range of new tools, templates and techniques that could be used to tackle these challenges and equip partnerships to deliver really effective collaborative communications.

In fact this needn't be a problem as collaborations will always have different levels of importance across partners. The important thing is that all the partners are telling the same story through consistent partnership communications.

Getting the timing right

It's difficult in a multi-partner collaboration to sync all your communications but failure to do so can cause embarrassment or difficulties. For instance, when one partner announces it has formally signed up to the partnership, when others have yet to make a decision.

Again a genuine partnership communications approach and co-created plan can help prevent this happening.

I heard that...

Not everybody will be in favour of your partnership. This was evidenced by workshop delegates who had experience of individuals briefing against the partnership or leaking details to the media or opposition councillors.

You won't stop this happening, but again getting communications teams involved early and co-creating a shared communications plan and message can help mitigate the damage.

It's all about the language

All the delegates had experience of where using the wrong language in communications could have a damaging effect.

It could be as simple as using language that is natural to one partner but meant nothing to another or, more seriously, using words which painted the collaboration in a negative light – once your partnership is seen to be about 'job losses' it's very hard to pull this back !

The workshop looked at how a back to the floor tool could be used to help partners learn about each other, and the language each uses.

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The input from the comms and project leads who volunteered for the pilot has enabled SSA and Blue Heron Communications to create a knowledge-packed session that will help both programme managers and communications managers build and deliver great collaborative communications.

The first workshops will be held in late January 2016 to support the new Combined Authority and other devolution deals.

What the delegates said:

"It was a really interesting workshop, thanks for inviting me along. There was [sic] lots of excellent content and practical tools which I will be using in some of my work going forward".

"Very useful tools, good insight".

"Interesting for me to learn in a space with a variety of colleagues".

"Very well facilitated and good mix of listening and doing".

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Visit www.sharedservicearchitects.co.uk/comms-seminar to find out more about the Collaborative Communications workshop