

Chapter 5

4-H Communications

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Introduction

A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanging, it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used. (Oliver Wendell Holmes)

Effective communication is the lubricant that can prevent friction between human beings. Alfred Fleisman

If I can listen to what he can tell me, if I can understand how it seems to him, if I can see its personal meaning for him, if I can sense the emotional flavor which it has for him...that is listening with understanding. (Carl Rogers)

Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear a word you are saying. (Father Time)

Communication is the key to a successful 4-H program.

Four-H agents must successfully communicate with volunteers, parents, members, teen leaders, co-workers, district and state staff, county chairs, the 4-H committee, 4-H subject matter sub-committees, the general public, the district director, other types of youth groups, 4-H clubs, sponsors, community leaders, school officials, newspapers, the mass media, etc. The list goes on and on, and what an important list it is! Each can be approached differently, depending upon the situation and reason for the communication, which brings us to the one most important rule to observe:

Know whom you are trying to reach and what you hope to accomplish.

In our everyday 4-H communicating, there may not be any such thing as an absolutely good, bad, or mediocre communicating style as there is in professional writing and speaking circles.

In 4-H there is an endless variety of motives and purposes to deal with constantly. But this does not mean any less attention should be given to how and what is written and said; in fact, the golden rule of 4-H communication stated above indicates just the opposite. The need is greater to be aware, within each communication, of the effect that communication will have on the reader or listener.

Agents, who develop sensitivity to the effect of their communications and constantly strive to improve each newsletter, speech, teaching situation, etc., strengthen the total communication system. By knowing the specific audience being addressed and the

objective of communication, the agent can be a more effective communicator. This sounds so obvious, and 4-H agents are apt to say “If I didn’t know whom I was writing to or why I was writing, I would be in bad shape!” Unfortunately the rule is far from obvious and all too easily forgotten in the busy pace of the 4-H program.

Often a basic mistake in communication is one that is eternally repeated; that is, to assume that what is known to us is known to everyone else, and will be interpreted the same from person to person. By referring to the rule of “know whom you are trying to reach and what you hope to accomplish,” much misinformation and misinterpretation can be eliminated and a well-operating 4-H communication system can be developed.

There is another rule to consider besides the golden rule stated above:

Once we have decided on the function of our communication, the correct communication form must be used.

This rule can be broken down into two parts. The first part includes statements that cover all methods of communication:

1. Be certain your communication can be clearly understood.
 - a. Make sure your communication can be understood clearly by the audience for which you have intended and the purpose that you have identified.
2. The information in your communication must be correct.
 - a. Meeting dates, times, places, people’s names, addresses, 4-H club affiliation should be proofread in all communication before it is delivered.
3. Give constant communication on a consistent basis
 - a. Advisor newsletters should be sent out monthly and at the same time each month. Answer phone calls within 24 hours if possible.
4. Be concise, not winding and voluminous.
 - a. Everyone is busy, and to be read, the 4-H agent’s material must be to the point. Tell them what they need to know in correct, plain English.

Remember: communication that fails is usually ambiguous; too long, with not enough information, difficult to read or understand; or too late to be effective.

Interpersonal Communications

Communicating on a personal level is a skill that we all have to some degree, but there is always room for improvement. Here are some tips to help in this area:

1. Self-disclosure builds openness and trust in a relationship and lets others know where you stand.
2. Acknowledge the strengths and talents of others and yourself.
3. Ask for comments often and listen for clues to your effectiveness and areas needing improvement.
4. Practice honesty about weaknesses of yourself and others and be open to suggestions that could change your less desirable and unwanted behaviors.

5. Give feedback to others that will help them communicate more effectively with you – and do it privately.

Group Communication and Facilitation Skills

Helping a group of people reach a decision, develop a plan or achieve a goal is critical to the success of the 4-H agent. As facilitator you have a central role in achieving success. You need to have an understanding of people, groups and facilitating styles. There are four basic steps that will help you work with groups:

1. **Preparation** – A major part of your work is done before the group comes together. Identify objectives for the activity or meeting. Prepare all the materials or information needed by the group or delegate parts of this preparation to people who have the resources to get it done. Insure that the physical setting of the group is adequate.
2. **Introductions** – For a group to function, the group needs to form. Allow members to get to know each other and the role that each fills. The facilitator should see that the group understands its mission and the environment in which they will function. Many leadership styles are effective in different settings. Present enough instructions to get the group going without being too authoritarian.
3. **Action** – While the group is working you have many responsibilities: bringing in people who are left out, returning the group to task, sharing information, summarizing progress, etc.
4. **Closure** – Sometimes the most difficult part of group action is stopping. You perform an important role when the meeting ends on time and celebrate successes so people can move on to greater achievements.

A facilitator models the following behaviors: accepts individuals but not all behavior, encourages, self-discloses, invites others to self examine, confronts behaviors not people, identifies issues, keeps group on task and owns the interactions of the group.

Tips For Improved Facilitation

1. **Self Awareness** – Keep in touch with your own feelings and communicate with the group.
2. **Attitude** – The attitude of the facilitator sets the tone. Be alert, focused, show positive energy, and remain flexible.
3. **Acceptance** – Encourage everyone to be themselves and to participate. This requires listening, giving attention and being non-judgmental. Establish that all individuals are unique, different, and valued.
4. **Focus** – Focus the attention of yourself and the group on the person who is talking and on task. Initiate the idea of one person talking at a time to help listening skills.
5. **Clarify** – Help others to clarify and speak their feelings, thoughts, ideas, values, questions and concerns.
6. **Posture** – Watch your body language and keep it open and inviting.

7. **Questions** – Ask open-ended questions and redirect questions to the group instead of answering them yourself (except questions of University/4-H policy or where you are the only member of the group who has the information to answer the question).
8. **Summarize** – Make summary statements often to help the group see what progress has been made, monitor progress toward goals.
9. **Inclusion** – Try to draw everyone into the conversation
10. **Feedback** – Give and request feedback from the group.

Using the Telephone

1. Have your purpose in mind before dialing.
2. State your problem, situation, etc.
3. Listen carefully.
4. Be Write enthusiastic in your responses.
5. pertinent information.
6. Be prepared to end the conversation and on a positive statement.

If possible, place your own phone calls. If you place your own phone calls, it takes only your time. If you ask the secretary to place the call, it takes the time of two people.

Using Mail

As we discuss the mail as a means of communication, let's break it down in two categories personal letters and mass mailings or circular letters.

Personal Letters

If a card or letter can answer a question or call, then consider the following advantages.

- a. You have what you said in writing.
- b. The client can file your letter for future reference.
- c. You can re-write it to state exactly what you intend before you send it.
- d. A letter is short and to the point.
- e. It can provide written recognition.

Some disadvantages may be:

- a. It may be more time consuming for both you and your secretary.
- b. It may not be as personal as a phone call.
- c. It may not arrive in time if the message was urgent.

Some Keys to successful person letters:

- a. Keep it short and to the point
- b. Information must be accurate and exact.
- c. If it includes dates and times, make sure they are correct and complete
- d. Correct grammar
- e. Correct spelling
- f. Neatly typed

Mass Mailings or Circular Letters

Many agents are quite successful in the use of circular letters as communication technique. Some do's and don'ts:

Do:

- a. Make them as short as possible and still adequately cover the subject or subjects.
- b. Use pictures or charts or cartoons if appropriate. Make sure you follow copyright laws.
- c. Make sure they are precise and accurate.
- d. Keep the sentences short and easy to read.
- e. Write as if you are talking to the people.

Don't:

- a. Fill them with trivia
- b. Make them too long

- c. Try to impress people with your knowledge of big words.
- d. Expect people to read every word you write. (This means you may need to repeat important dates, times, locations, etc.).

Using News Articles

Agents have found several systems that work in communicating with their clientele through newspapers.

- 1. They may have their own weekly or monthly news columns.
- 2. They write news releases and send them to the paper or papers and hope they get printed
- 3. They may a contact at the paper that they call when news is breaking and the paper then sends a reporter to cover the event.

If you find yourself doing your own writing, some important tips to remember include:
Nearness –Editors want stories localized.

Importance – How many people does it affect?

Accuracy – Proofread your copy Watch spelling, double check names, dates, times.

Be Precise – It convinces your readers, you know what you are talking about.

Timely – old news is o news and they won't use it.

If you are fortunate enough to have the editor as your friend or have a contact in the newsroom, some general guidelines are needed to keep you in their good graces.

- 1. Do not waste their time.
- 2. If you are giving them the information and they are writing the story make sure your facts are correct.
- 3. If they send someone to cover the event, make sure your directions are accurate and the time and location is clear.
- 4. Keep them posted on upcoming events and give them plenty of lead-time.

Some General Guidelines

- 1. Do your homework on public relations (get to know the editor).

2. Don't forget the weekly papers. Sometimes coverage can be as good with a weekly newspaper as with a daily.
3. If you have several papers in the area, make sure they all get the same release at the same time.
4. Follow the local editorial policies.

Using Radio

The radio can really help your communication system. There are several ways you can put the radio to work for you. You may:

- Write your news releases for radio and send them to the local and area stations.
- Do guest appearances on local radio stations.
- Tape shows and have the local station use them at their leisure.
- Do a regular radio show – produced live at the station – daily, weekly, monthly, etc.
- Do a radio show live from your home or office, via telephone. (Most stations are equipped to handle phone-in shows.)

Some general ideas to help you communicate more effectively by radio include:

1. Write your releases specifically for broadcasting.
2. Use only current information – radio news is NOW!
3. Remember – broadcasting is conversation.
4. Keep your audience in mind. Remember once news is reported it's gone.
5. Keep information localized as much as possible.
6. Keep the language simple – not too much technical information.
7. Be enthusiastic.

Using Television

This medium is a good way to communicate with the public. Many of the same techniques used in writing for radio apply to television, with the added use of another of the senses. The news story or the radio show must be converted to an audio-visual presentation. The best advice on how to succeed in television comes from the television staff themselves. Find a station that is willing to work with you and let them help you develop your programming. Some possibilities might be:

Commercial television – Public service time may be available.

Public or Educational Television – They are usually looking for programming.

Cable Television – Local stations are usually looking for talent for programming. They may even provide the equipment and let you do the taping. In any case, with any system, find out who your audience is and gear your programming to that audience.

Using Audio-Visual Aids

A picture is worth a thousand words. Experts say that before an individual really learns something it must be communicated to them seven times. If one of our senses is used more than once, more is learned quickly. Do not overlook the use of audio-visual aids in conducting the 4-H educational programs.

Video and audiotapes, slide sets, flannel boards, flip charts, films – these are just a few. The State 4-H staff and the Section of Communications and Technology can provide specialized help in these areas. Contact either office for assistance in developing these teaching aids.

Barriers to Effective Communications

In the book, *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs* Marlene Wilson devotes an entire chapter to communications. She stresses that communication is an all pervasive and dynamic ingredient of all human relations, and is a key to success in volunteer organizations.

Wilson identifies ten common barriers or blocks to effective communication. Spotting these barriers can help us deal with them as 4-H professionals.

Distance and/or inaccessibility – People need to be in touch with each other for communication to occur. If you are never around or have an image of not listening, communication will be hindered.

Distortion – Confusing facts and feelings often create miscommunication. Focus on facts and avoid communicating what we think someone meant or said.

Lack of Trust and Leveling – Often people do not communicate problems with programs or performance because they are afraid of the reaction. We need to build a supporting climate where people know that a good try is a success and we all want what is best for 4-H members. This should be a two-way street between 4-H professionals and volunteers.

Hidden Agendas – Beware of this barrier that often shows its head [the saying is: “rears its ugly head] near competition and needs assessment. When people have a strong desire for a preconceived outcome, it has a powerful impact on communication.

Ineffective Listening – I am painfully aware of the difficulty related to listening when a participant asks what I think about their comment and I have no idea what was just said. Work at listening for the meaning that is being communicated.

Believing Something Must Be So Just Because We (o Someone Else) Say It Is – This also goes for believing something just because it was written. We must always use all our skills to interpret the validity of messages sources of information, and alternatives available.

Using the “Allness Syndrome”—Allowing us to operate based on stereotypes and traditions can hide true opportunities and meanings. All farmers are not alike. All volunteers are not alike. All low-income people are not alike.

Either/Or Syndrome – There are more than two sides to most stories. Look for middle ground and fringe alternatives to find solutions.

Frozen Images – I saw a cup the other day that carried the message “The older I get, the better I used to be.” Things are not what they used to be. The best way for this year may not be the best for tomorrow.

Gaps Between People -- “Not good, not bad, just different!” Remember this quote. Differences can cut off communication completely if we let them.