

Communication Basics in the Wildland-Urban Interface¹

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What is communication? It is the process of sharing information and building understanding. While providing information may be as simple as posting a sign or distributing a brochure, building understanding is more challenging. When natural resource professionals and extension agents effectively communicate with residents, landowners, or community leaders, they provide messages and opportunities for these audiences to think about and understand. Some types of communication are designed so a recipient not only understands but also has the skills and commitment to make decisions or adopt a new practice.

For communication to build understanding, a natural resource professional or extension agent should pay attention to the audience's prior knowledge and attitudes, perceptions and impressions, and feedback. Because audiences vary, each message and presentation may be designed for a particular audience. When communication is effective, the ideas that are constructed in the minds of that audience are similar to the message the resource professional intended to convey. Even though we can only control what is presented, we can facilitate the process of building knowledge by providing the right information, in the best format, from the most appropriate source, in recognition of

conflicting attitudes, and in memorable and useful ways. This fact sheet explores several strategies that help make communication effective.

The Elements

The communication process includes a sender, a message, and a receiver. Optimal communication is a two-way interaction between sender and receiver, with assessment preceding the message and feedback following it. Some basic concepts help improve each of these elements when resource professionals are working with residents, landowners, and community leaders:

- The sender should be trustworthy, knowledgeable, and helpful in the eyes of the receiver.
- The message should be understandable, relevant, and clear to the receiver.
- The receiver should be comfortable, attentive, and interested.

We all know of examples when communication about natural resources does not go smoothly because one of these characteristics is missing. The sender may be new to the area or from a different cultural

1. This document is FOR 112, one of a series of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published April 2007. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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background and therefore not perceived as knowledgeable. The sender could be from a regulatory agency that has a negative reputation in certain parts of the state and therefore is perceived as not trustworthy or helpful. The message may include unfamiliar words or convey a value that conflicts with the receivers' attitudes. The message may be in a language that is not familiar to receiver. The receiver may be sitting on a hard chair, squinting into the sun, or sleepy after a short night on single-parent duty, and therefore not completely attentive to the message. See **Figure 1**.



Figure 1. Natural resource professionals give presentations in a variety of locations to a variety of people. Credits: Larry Korhnak

Building Understanding

What is heard, accepted, and remembered is determined by the receiver. To improve the chance of that new understanding being similar to what is intended, the extension agent or resource professional's responsibility is to present the information in such a way that the audience members are able to build their own understanding. A communicator must pay attention to more than the words that are used (even though they alone are extremely important). The tone of the introduction and attitude can influence how welcomed the audience feels, as can the examples that are used.

Pay attention to the language used in a presentation. Words that are commonly used by foresters, like stand, bole, or pathogen may not communicate the same thing to local residents. Resource professionals and extension agents should use language that most people use when talking about nature, such as forest, tree trunk, or germ. If you are

not sure if a phrase is appropriate, you can always ask the audience, but in a way that does not embarrass the person who is brave enough to admit ignorance. Focus groups, interviews, and casual conversations can help you know what words are not commonly understood. Watch out for emotionally loaded words and use them to your advantage. Cognitive scientist George Lakoff has encouraged the Sierra Club to use the phrase "Arctic Refuge" instead of the non-word "ANWR," and "Forest Protection and Restoration" campaign instead of "End Commercial Logging" (Butler 2004). (Also see FOR 111 "Starting an Informal Presentation in the Wildland-Urban Interface"). Of course, if the audience is not comfortable with English, there are additional communication challenges. Find handouts in their language, use interpreters, speak slowly and distinctly, and look for people who can present information in that language if you cannot.

Do not preach or judge. A resource professional or extension agent who believes strongly that residents should do certain things may have the tendency to preach or judge during a presentation. Some people do not like to be told what to do under any circumstance and may react negatively. Strategies that do not work with a teenager or a spouse will not work with an interface audience either! It is important to provide information, to help people build their own conclusion from the facts, and to identify misconceptions that prevent people from understanding your message. The process of constructing information can be assisted by asking and linking key questions (see section on using questions below).

Presenters may not know that their tones or stances are offensive until observers give them. You might try working in teams to help each other assess presentations and improve skills.

Be careful when using threats, fear, and guilt. Resource agencies and extension offices are responsible for communicating some ideas and information that could cause the audience to react with fear, anger, or emotional distress. This information must be addressed carefully as it is easy to induce helplessness, which does not empower people to action and may encourage people to avoid

listening to more information (Severin and Tankard 2001). Messages that convey caution or risk without frightening people are more likely to inspire action when they are accompanied by specific information about what to do, information that makes sense, and actions that are possible and reasonable (Leventhal and Cameron 1994). The credibility of the agency is also an important factor in making such a message effective. Make sure the agency is perceived as trustworthy. A strong-arm tactic to get attention can backfire before the presenter gets a chance to explain how easy it is to mitigate the risk.

Use stories and examples. People learn by experience and when experience is not available, a story or example of someone else's experience can often substitute. A well-placed story can bring a concept to life, providing imagery for relaying the message. Storytellers often use simple tools such as vivid descriptions, action verbs, quotes, concrete descriptions, and a sense of a timeline to make information memorable and meaningful (De Young and Monroe 1996).

Engaging the Audience

Use questions. The process of asking a question cues the audience to the topic they should pay attention to. The process of answering a question involves a quick mental search for relevant information. If the question can be answered by a simple fact, "When is your garbage picked up in this neighborhood?", not much thinking occurs. But when a series of questions are presented together, the resource professional can lead audiences along a particular path in their thinking. "When do you put your garbage out for pickup?" "When are wild animals more likely to be roaming around looking for food?" The juxtaposition of these questions means the participants have to consider two previously independent bits of information in their short-term memory at the same time. They cannot help but make the link, even though the resource professional has not explicitly told them what to do, i.e., "put your garbage out the morning of collection rather than the night before."

Use small groups. Trainers often use small group work to engage more people in talking about a

topic at the same time. For many people, learning is facilitated when there is an opportunity to talk through a concept with others (Leinhardt 1992). Resource professionals and extension agents can use small group activities to encourage people to express ideas, to come up with answers, and to adapt the ideas to their own situation (see **Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Allowing people to work through information in small groups can increase understanding. Credits: Larry Korhnak

The challenge with using small groups is the possibility that discussions may deviate into new territory or that the presenter may "lose control." Natural resource professionals and agents may wish to improve their facilitation skills to become more comfortable using group discussion in a program. The type of questions they ask and the direction the conversation takes could be good indicators of what the audience is grasping or misunderstanding.

Connect to the values that resonate with the audience. Information must be relevant to listeners for them to invest in contemplating and processing the message. It is fairly easy to connect wildland-urban interface topics to the issues that residents and decision makers care about—environmental quality, beauty, health, and safety, for instance, are ubiquitous concerns. A good understanding of the audience prior to a presentation or campaign will help a presenter speak to the values that are most meaningful. By the same token, if the values you present are perceived to conflict with your message, people may stop listening. If trees are important to landowners, they are not likely to listen to a message that they perceive means they have to

cut down their trees. If you know that mature trees are important to these homeowners for shade and beauty, your firewise message should suggest how to trim trees, how to maintain trees, or how to manipulate other vegetation to reduce fire risk.

Communicating about defensible space is a good example of an opportunity to address homeowner attitudes. People who value shade, wildlife, privacy, and natural views may believe that creating defensible space will destroy what they care about most. They will disregard the information about fire, responsibility, and risk, choosing instead to act on what they value even if it is a gamble in terms of their safety (Shands 1988; Sullivan 1994; Monroe, Long and Marynowski 2003). Interviews in Florida and Minnesota revealed that homeowners share several important perspectives. They enjoy their natural landscape, they care about wildlife, they use their land for recreation, and they desire privacy. Messages to encourage these residents to create defensible space could suggest that openings are good for wildlife, that privacy can be maintained with vegetative screens farther from the home, and that managing the understory does not mean weekly mowing (Monroe and Nelson 2004).

Communicating with policy makers and community leaders should also involve understanding and connecting with the issues they care about. Constituent support may be required for those seeking re-election. Fiscal responsibility may be the key for community business leaders. Public health and safety is often of great concern. If you are not sure what will motivate your community leaders to listen, read local reports to gain an appreciation of the local history or ask someone who attends the community meetings for background information.

Work to build trust. Many of these tips help build a partnership between the audience and the resource agency or extension office, as represented by the resource professional or agent. When you use your own home as an example, you become a homeowner, just like the audience. By removing the distance that the uniform or title conveys, the presenter becomes more trustworthy. By engaging the audience in asking questions, offering observations, and discussing solutions, the speaker creates an

opportunity for the audience to “own” the concepts. Many studies suggest that the greater the trust placed in an agency, the more likely people will be to accept its policies; so working to gain trust could make policies more acceptable (Shindler and Toman 2003). Resource professionals and extension agents should design presentations to indicate that they are trained, qualified, and knowledgeable (without being pretentious); are concerned about the audience; are fair and honest; and that they share the same values as the audience (Johnson 1999). By using the word “you,” participants could feel as though you are speaking directly to them. The word “we” is even more powerful.

Summary

A number of important variables can be used to transform an adequate communication effort into a powerful, meaningful, and memorable one. Experiment with these ideas in your next presentation to interface residents, community leaders, and other extension audiences.

Suggested Readings

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