

Transparency in Agriculture and Natural Resources: Defining Transparent Communication¹

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Introduction

Transparency has commonly been discussed as both openness and the opposite of secrecy (Florini, 1998; Jahansoozi, 2006; Rawlins, 2008a; Rawlins, 2008b). Rawlins (2008a) defined transparency as “the deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information— whether positive or negative in nature—in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices” (p. 75).

The idea of transparency has been around since the late 1800s and is a concept that has been valued in business management, public relations, and government (Bigelow, Sharfman, & Wenley, 1922; Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007; Stoker & Rawlins, 2004). The agricultural industry has approached transparency in the food sector from the standpoint of the tracking, tracing, and labeling of food products (Barling et al., 2009; Beulens, Broens, Folstar, & Hofstede 2005; Opara & Mazaud, 2001; van Dorp, 2003; Wognum, Bremmers, Trienekens, van der Vorst, & Bloemhof, 2011). However, given the definition and measurement of transparent communication, transparency can also be considered a communication strategy.

This series will discuss transparent communication and how it can be used in the agriculture and natural resources industries:

- *Transparency in Agriculture and Natural Resources #1: Defining Transparent Communication*
- *Transparency in Agriculture and Natural Resources #2: Applying the Concepts of Transparent Communication*
- *Transparency in Agriculture and Natural Resources #3: Benefits and Challenges of Transparent Communication*



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Components of Transparent Communication

To be transparent when communicating, your communication should include substantial information, participation, and accountability (Rawlins, 2008a).

1. This document is AEC563, one of a series of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date August 2015. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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Substantial Information

A communicator can work toward achieving transparency through communication by providing substantial information for their target audience (Rawlins, 2008b). Substantial information is providing information that is relevant to and meets the needs of your audience. When incorporating substantial information into communication, there are several questions that should be considered:

- Is the information relevant to my target audience? For example, information may be relevant to your audience if it impacts them or is important or useful to them.
- Is the information presented in a clear manner for this target audience?
- Is the information complete?
- Is the information accurate?
- Is the information reliable?
- Is the information timely?
- Can the information be fact-checked with another source of information about the same topic?

Understanding who is in your target audience and their characteristics is key to providing substantial information. For more information about identifying a target audience and its characteristics, see EDIS publication [#AEC397](#).

Participation

Communication becomes more transparent when the target audience is asked to participate in the conversation and provide feedback (Rawlins, 2008b). Sufficient participation can be achieved when organizations invite audience members to participate in the conversation and then respond to those audience members when they provide input. To increase the level of transparency in communication, the following questions should be considered:

- Has the audience been asked to be involved in the communication?
- Has the audience been asked to provide feedback?
- Have responses been provided for any audience input?
- Does the information provided include adequate detail?
- Is the information easy to find?
- Has the organization taken the initiative to understand and ask for audience opinions?

For an audience member to participate in the communication process, the organization must be receptive to the audience's input. Additionally, the information must also be

easily accessible and provide adequate detail for the audience. Transparency can be achieved through the incorporation of “active participation in acquiring, distributing, and creating knowledge” (Cotterell, 1999, p. 419).

Accountability

The last component of transparent communication is accountability. Organizations that have been identified as transparent have been recognized as being accountable for their words, actions, and decisions (Rawlins, 2008b). Accountability can be incorporated into communication by considering the following questions:

- Does the information cover both sides of controversial issues?
- Does the communication include information that may be damaging to the organization?
- Can the information presented be compared to industry standards?
- Have mistakes been communicated?

When accountability is incorporated into communication, organizations are not hiding communication that is important or relevant to the target audience. The organizations that incorporate accountability into their communication are forthcoming and open to criticism (Rawlins, 2008a).

How This Information Can Be Used

The components of transparent communication (substantial information, participation, and accountability) can be considered when planning communication or preparing to communicate. Additionally, existing communication can be evaluated to assess the presence of transparent communication components and thus the resulting level of transparency.

It is important to keep in mind that it may not be possible to incorporate all components of transparent communication into each piece of communication. However, to be transparent, an organization's communication should reflect the three components over time.

The components of transparent communication can be incorporated into communication at all levels; a large organization such as UF/IFAS Extension, smaller subsets of the organization such as county extension offices, Extension programming, and one-on-one interactions with extension clientele can all employ transparent communication. Additionally, commodity organizations, businesses, and individuals can incorporate transparency into their

communication. Examples of how to incorporate the components of transparent communication and discussion of the benefits of transparent communication can be found in the subsequent publications in this series.

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