

Crafting your agency's policy communication strategy: considerations for public health systems

RBMC and Technical Assent have worked on major policy challenges for major public health systems around the world. In our work, we find that policy often is a critical driver of broader public health system transformation efforts that support the needs of both the public and the workforce. Yet too often, the failure to communicate new policies effectively hinders the desired outcomes of policy updates and overhauls. This communication challenge is particularly important for agencies like the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which has millions of veterans looking to them for guidance on how to receive care. In addition, physicians and organizations supporting veterans rely on clear communications to be effective. We recommend a three-step approach to effective communication of policy changes.

Step 1 - Understand the “Why” and Communicate it Concisely: Effective policy changes start with a core purpose. Whether it's improving patients' experience with a system, reducing costs to serve patients more effectively, addressing patient safety, making the workforce more efficient, or addressing another root cause, it's vital that senior leaders communicate the “why” of a policy change early and over-communicate it broadly across the workforce. Communications need to be concise, focused, and incorporate no more than two or three reasons why the policy change has taken place.

Step 2 - Detail the Specific Impacts on Your Employees and External Partners: With a clear set of messages about the reasons for the policy change established, the next critical aspect of communications is addressing the specific impacts of the changes to various roles, in different contexts. Answering questions such as the following will help provide clarity to the staff:

- How does this impact patients? Clinical staff? Medical service staff? Support staff? Families and caregivers?
- What are the different impacts by location?
- What does the new policy require to be done differently?
- How does the new policy change the day-to-day operations of the system?
- What is being done to address potential negative impacts of the policy change on the staff?

Step 3 - Create a Process for Ongoing Feedback: Too often, communication of a policy change is a one-off effort: the policy is changed; staff are notified; and the policy is considered implemented, potentially with low uptake and buy-in. If communication stops after one email to all staff and a series of town halls, it is unlikely that the policy has been effectively communicated or that it will be adopted widely.

In major public health systems and agencies such as the VA, feedback is critical—both on the extent to which the policy is being implemented and the extent to which the policy is achieving its core purpose. Because communications affect all aspects of an organization, it's vital to identify feedback mechanisms that are easy for employees to use. Some examples include:

- Identify a representative group of individuals across geographies and roles to provide feedback in a monthly session to senior officers of the system
- Send carefully crafted surveys as another vital tool in soliciting and reacting to feedback
- Create spontaneous direct engagement between management and employees simply by “walking the floor,” as opposed to announced visits to hospitals and clinics
- Send follow up emails and organize town halls to solicit feedback after the initial policy roll out

Effective communication of policy changes is critical to healthcare transformation. This is especially true for organizations such as the VA that have millions of people relying on clear messaging. Public health systems should consider how to best craft their agency's policy communications strategy to best serve its employees, as well as the patients it serves.

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