Strategy: The Art of getting Someone to do Something

When organizations are discussing their communication needs, someone will usually propose a press release, issuing a report, expanding a website, developing a video, adding a Facebook presence, or the like. But media is merely a tactical choice – *how* the message will be conveyed. If you're planning media *before* determining the prerequisite steps to strategy, you will not be strategic.

☐   *Strategy* is a plan to get someone to do something.

☐   *Tactics* are the methods used to achieve the plan, including media.

Strategy must be intentional, flexible and responsive. It requires a clear goal. Tactics are derived to achieve the goal. Strategy always informs tactics, including media. Strategic communications use media tactics as part of getting something to happen.   When tactics and media are not purposefully conceived to achieve a specific goal, the result becomes a function of *how* it was done rather than *what* the goal was. It's only after defining *what* you want to occur that you can plan *how* to do it.

Some believe that they already use media strategically to "create awareness" or "build public education." But even awareness and education are only *tactics*. They may be part of *how* you get to the goal. But the goal is always action of some kind: someone does something, as a result something changes and opens new opportunity.

Always start by identifying what is supposed to happen; define what action you want. It will help clarify and direct what you need to write or say. This paper provides several examples of how Midwestern conservation groups served by the Duke Foundation grant applied strategic principles successfully.

A template for strategic communications

Communication strategy is active and dynamic. It follows a simple structure of five questions. Answering them thoroughly will ensure your communications are strategic:

GOAL: What do you want to have happen?

TARGET/AUDIENCE: Who has the power to make it happen?

STORY/MESSAGE: What story do they need to hear to take the action you want?

MESSENGER: Who should they hear the story from?

MEDIA: How do we get the story to them?

Evaluation is a continual part of the progression. It's critical to keep asking questions. How are steps 1-5 working? Is the goal really right, should it be changed? Are there any additional targets? As circumstances change, go back to step one and work through the template to adjust, refine, or redirect strategy. Once a basic strategy is established, it's usually easy to see where adjustments are necessary.

Using Communication to Get What You Want

Most of the ideas presented here merely organize what you already know about communication. After all, you've been a communicator all your life. For example, at the dinner table if you want some fresh peas from the far end of the table, you'll get the attention of someone near the peas, and ask that they, "pass the peas, please." Usually you'll get the peas.

1. Putting peas on your plate is the *goal*.

2. Someone near the peas is the t*arget*.

3. Polite request for action is the *message*.

4. You are the *messenger*.

5. Your own voice is the *media*.

Communications to get a public policy passed is similar to getting the peas passed. However, something seems to happen when stepping away from the table and becoming advocates for policy or change. Advocacy groups regularly issue talking points, news releases and other materials loaded with facts, but lacking strategy. They move information, but generally fail to move people.

Imagine using "advocate talk" at the dinner table:

"We have a severe and growing dietary crisis. Let me share this excerpt from a research report on the subject, 'A balanced diet is vital to human health, and peas are an outstanding nutritious source of vitamin K, C, B-1, fiber, and protein.' Furthermore, it's apparent that only a privileged few have peas on their plate, while others suffer with none. Join me to end this injustice so that everyone has their fair share of peas.

Silly as that example of advocate speech may be, it is how many advocates communicate in public. They give a wealth of facts supporting their position. But there is no strategy, no specific target, nor any clear message to pass the peas.

Newsletters are a common example of non-strategic communication. Most newsletters, it seems, are put together and sent out because "it's time to send out the newsletter, again". There is little strategy, no working definition of results for upcoming issue, it is mostly an effort to meet a calendar demand. As a result, the newsletter editors use whatever happens to be available as the deadline approaches. Content is often selected to fill the page rather than intentionally forward a stated goal. This is why so many newsletters end up with mundane or worse outdated information. Such newsletters are weak because of *how* they are produced. Simply changing the production schedule to "as needed" would be more effective. Content could be carefully selected and focused to make something happen with every issue. Newsletters are a missed opportunity unless each issue has a goal and strong tactical content.

For an organization to become strategic, everyone involved in communications (virtually everyone in the organization) needs to understand the strategy. It works best when the template is applied in a group process, so everyone understands the reasoning and goals. However, as it often goes, there may be some who don't or can't participate; such as board members, volunteers, or major donors. They may come after the fact with strong ideas about what and how media should be used. If they felt unheard or ignored it can create bad feelings. The best way to head off problems is to sit down and work through the template process with them. They may have some very good ideas that didn't come up earlier. A lot of turf disputes and hurt feelings can be headed off by walking others through the chosen strategy. Everyone, board, staff, volunteers, and funders needs to understand that *what* you are trying to do, must direct decisions about *how to do it.*