



September 2009 (January 2009 orig.)
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Submitted by Torrington

Communication Planning Helps Torrington Reach its Goals

When you embark on a trip you shouldn't ever lose sight of your destination. But it may be even more important to carefully and thoughtfully navigate the course of your journey, taking the time to get it right and learning as much as you can along the way. If you do, you stand a pretty good chance of safely reaching your destination and of being able to successfully deal with the situation you find there.

This lesson clearly comes through when members of the Torrington Early Childhood Collaborative (TECC) reflect on their journey through the strategic communications planning process prescribed by Discovery's Three-Step Communications Tool Kit (http://www.discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_1080.pdf).

"The communications planning process we engaged in raised key issues and forced those of us on the Public Awareness Committee to address them," says Donna Labbe, the Community Outreach Coordinator for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund's (the Memorial Fund) Discovery Collaborative in Torrington. "In the process, we learned where all our key players were coming from, reached broad-based agreement on what our priorities should be, and clarified who we needed to reach, when, and with what messages." According to other members of the Public Awareness Committee, the communications planning process also helped the Collaborative dig deep to thoroughly think about what they needed to make happen in order to be successful.

Anita Ford Saunders, a communications consultant for the Discovery initiative who provided technical assistance to TECC, says that the communications work done in Torrington demonstrates the benefits of methodically going through Steps 1-3 of Discovery's communications tool kit. "The results of their communications planning and implementation effort make it clear just how important an effective and well-designed communications effort is to the overall success of the Discovery

initiative in communities. It's not just an overnight thing ending up with a brochure at the end of the process. It actually works to bring about meaningful changes and to engage the people who can make change happen. In Torrington, the leaders of TECC have become the go-to people for anything concerning early childhood education. Even the Mayor and Superintendent of Schools now refer people to TECC as a resource."

The Process

Prior to Saunders' involvement with TECC, the Public Awareness Committee spent about a year carefully working through steps 1 and 2 of the Communications Tool Kit at their monthly meetings. The completion of these steps resulted in a case statement that told the group's story. But finalizing the case statement presented the challenge of getting everyone involved on the same page. The effort it took to overcome this challenge opened the participants' eyes to the need for reaching consensus on the group's primary priorities. The final case statement ultimately included a written description of TECC's mission, objectives, emphasis on community involvement, the participating organizations, and contact information for those who may want to know more or to become involved. Going through these steps proved effective in building TECC's awareness in the community, enlisting new people to join the group and raising funds from the city and private companies to support the work.

After completing steps 1 and 2 of the Communications Toolkit, TECC applied for a small amount of money to bring Saunders aboard as a Discovery communications consultant from The Memorial Fund. Over a three to four month period, Saunders worked with the Public Awareness Committee to assist them in addressing Step 3 and establishing a strategic framework that encompassed the messages, audiences and objectives as well as the actions that needed to be taken to accomplish TECC's mission. It was during this time that the group defined its responses to potential problems and crises, developed its chain

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of command and outlined how it would go about positioning its spokespeople as authorities on early childhood education.

The Plan

TECC's Strategic Communications Plan, or "Communications Matrix" as the Public Awareness Committee refers to it, is the product that resulted from the group's work on Step 3. The broad goal stated in the plan is to convey the message throughout Torrington that:

TECC, in partnership with the community, city and school system is committed to ensuring the success of all of Torrington's children age birth through eight.

The communications plan targets two separate sets of audiences. One set includes parents, guardians and grandparents and the other early educators and care providers of children birth through eight. For the first audience, the strategy is for individual TECC members of the transition and professional development committees to convey the following messages:

1. Member organizations of TECC support families by connecting them to quality local early childhood community resources.
2. TECC will educate and connect families to tools to help prepare children for school success.

The materials and actions that will convey these messages include a brochure, promotional giveaways, a Web site, printed resource guide, and a phone book listing the numbers of all key contacts.

The strategy for reaching early educators and care providers is for individual committee members to communicate these messages:

1. TECC is the best resource to connect you to information and early education trainings
2. The resources and information provided at these trainings will help guide educators' instructional programs to meet the standards of the Connecticut Preschool Curriculum & Assessment Framework.

The materials and actions supporting these messages include the distribution of brochures and flyers and the listing of professional development trainings in resource guides. Another activity being planned is to conduct a survey to assess the training needs of early childhood educators and care providers and to develop the trainings most needed and requested.

The Results

Now that TECC's strategic communications template is in place, the Public Awareness Committee has continued meeting monthly to monitor progress, address problems and explore new opportunities for building broader awareness and understanding of its work.

"When we first started to think about developing a strategic communications plan, we were thinking along the lines of an ad campaign," says Labbe. "But as we wrapped our heads around the three steps in Discovery's communications tool box, we saw that we were doing something a lot more comprehensive. We were creating a roadmap for change."



Torrington Representative Anne L. Ruwet listens to TECC members.



Congressman Chris Murphy attends a Roundtable in Torrington and talks with participants.

PHOTOS: KARLA WOODWORTH



Some of the most noteworthy changes that came from the strategic communications planning process were:

- Generating community-wide awareness and understanding of TECC's work
- Engaging more parents and having them assume leadership positions
- Attracting champions such as Torrington's mayor, a city council member, two state representatives, a state senator, and the school superintendent
- Leveraging additional investments in Discovery from the city (that resulted from a request to the city council by involved parents) and from companies such as Wal-Mart and a local construction and engineering company
- Connecting families and organizations to each other and to opportunities for improving the education of young children in Torrington
- Transferring ownership of the initiative to families and early educators and care providers
- Forming new partnerships

- Creating parent-run People Empowering People (PEP) and Aspira Parents for Excellence (APEX) training courses.

In short, the communications planning process has resulted in helping TECC team gel and work together to get things done on a broader scale and scope. The group's next major challenge is to create a comprehensive citywide early childhood education system that binds together all individuals and groups that have a role to play in improving outcomes for young children. The strategic communication planning process that TECC followed may just have paved the way for addressing this system-wide challenge. As Labbe, says, "The thinking process we went through remains very important to us. As other issues and challenges present themselves, we're confident that we can use the same process to successfully address them." ■

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut's children by supporting school change, informing the public debate on educational issues, and strengthening the involvement of parents and the community in education.

