

Communicating Biodiversity to Private Forest Owners

Planning of strategic communication

By
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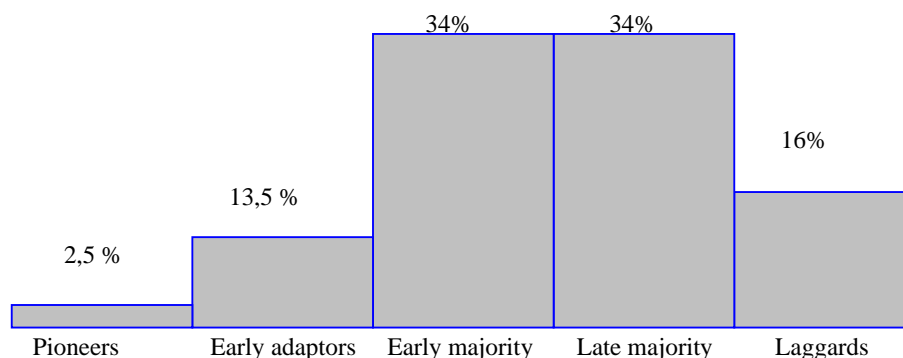
Strategic communication

Every manager communicates. It is almost 90% of his or her daily activities. However in our projects, programs or policies we often see communication only as a matter of mass media.

“Help us outlining a movie to convince private forest owners to care about biodiversity, we should show them some dramatic visuals of the consequences of clear cutting, some animation of various scenarios, some pictures of a beautiful forest managed close to nature”.

It is very tempting to embark upon such an approach. But it is only strategic if we can answer questions such as: would the movie reach all 200.000 or more private forest owners in our country? What would motivate them to watch? What would it change in them? It is highly probable that a movie will not change the behaviour of private forest owners to a more biodiversity friendly way of forest management. And communication should be seen in that wider perspective: supporting the objective of forests managed in a nature friendly way.

Strategic communication emerges when we start seeing the issue of biodiversity and forestry not anymore as explaining the importance of biodiversity to private forest owners and trying to convince them to act accordingly. Strategic communication starts with seeing the issue as the introduction of an innovation among a large group of potential ‘customers’. And to motivate them for a new way of forest management.



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In the process to adopt an innovation mostly 5 different groups are identified. Some people are the first to adopt new clothing fashions, new farming methods, buy new products. Other individuals adopt the innovation much later. People can be classified into categories in the figure shown above. Pioneers are often venturesome, they are willing to try new ideas at some risk. Early adopters adopt new ideas but are more careful, they are guided by respect, they are opinion leaders in their community. The early majority are deliberate, they adopt new ideas before the average person, although they rarely are leaders. The late majority is sceptical, they only adopt an innovation after a majority of people have tried it. Laggards are suspicious and only adopt the innovation if it in itself becomes a tradition².

While introducing an innovation, it we should first focus on pioneers, communicate to identify them, communicate to let them start experimenting with new management methods, communicate with key influentials to trigger supportive changes in the political and legal system (forest inspectors, state forestry enterprises, national parks, ministries). Once we have a group of pioneers ‘experimenting’ with the ‘new’ approach, we may focus on next groups (early adaptors, early majority, late majority etc.). The communication necessary to reach and involve these groups, one could call strategic communication. In this approach communication is integrated in the project or program as a management tool right from the start. Box 1. below shows the differences between an ‘uninformed communication approach and a strategic communication approach.

Box 1. Communication approaches	
‘Uninformed’ communication approach	Strategic communication approach
Managers focus on media; come up with exciting ideas, that capture the imagination	Managers analyze the wider system; plan strategically to achieve desired outcomes
Approach is to convince people individually; their social environment is not analyzed	Interventions are focused on goals - audiences and messages determine media
Communication is an end of pipe activity, isolated from the rest of the project/program	Communication is from the start integrated in the full scope of the project/program
Content and message are secondary and cannot answer why or what questions	Target audiences are involved in planning; interventions are based on their values

Planning

Popular wisdom on planning is very clear: it is important and we often forget to do so at our own expense. Planning is reducing risks. Managers all know one or more of these sayings:

“Failing to plan is planning to fail” (proverb)

“Good plans shape good decisions. That's why good planning helps to make elusive dreams come true.” (Lester R. Bittel)

“The Plan is nothing. Planning is everything” (Dwight D. Eisenhower)

Planning contributes highly to success. It is recommendable to consider a number of key questions at the start of the process:

² Based on Philip Kotler, Marketing Management, ISBN 0-13-261363-8, 1997, p. 335 - 342

- Where are you now and where do you want to be?
- What will you need to do to get there?
- What role can communication play to achieve your goals?
- How will you learn from your experiences en route?

Even though most people rationally know the importance of investing in the starting phase of any project or undertaking, it often receives too little attention. Furthermore, in many cases the role of communication is disregarded or only considered after the planning stage. Practice shows that this pitfall reduces potential effects strongly. Box 2. below shows the various steps to plan strategic communication.

BOX 2. 10 Steps to plan strategic communication

1. Analyse the issue from a wider perspective: redefine management objectives
2. Outline the role of communication as support to management objectives
3. Identify the main target groups
4. Identify communication objectives (knowledge, attitudes, behaviour)
5. Identify strategy and messages
6. Identify communication vehicles
7. Budget communication activities
8. Organise communication activities
9. Plan communication activities
10. Monitor and evaluate

Situation Analysis

The most difficult is to make a good situation analysis. In most cases managers either assume they do not have enough time for it, or they assume they know all the details already. In both cases they act based on assumptions. A very risky affair, like failing to plan! Often it is difficult to make a situation analysis: *because of the trees, we do not see the forest*. Specialists often have a difficulty in seeing an issue in a wider context, from different perspectives. However most issues we want to solve, are dependent on a complex wider system. If we do not take that into account, our efforts, energy and money may be wasted. Communicating biodiversity to private forest owners, is, from a wider perspective, an introduction of an innovation: a new way of forest management. The turning point in effective strategic planning is to make sure one gets 'that wider picture', and a more 'system-based' approach. In order to get this wider picture it is often helpful to organize focus groups with opinion leaders from major stakeholders. Box 3. explains what a focus group is.

Box 3. What is a Focus group?

A focus group is a non-directive type of interviewing a specific social group: a segment of consumers, voters or stakeholders in a policy issue. It draws on group interaction to gain greater insight into why certain opinions are held. Focus groups are used to improve planning and design of new products or programs, provide means for evaluation and provide insights and qualitative data for communication and marketing strategies.

Usually, a focus group consists out of six to ten people who are invited to spend a few hours with a skilled moderator to discuss a product, service, organization, policy measure or other marketing entity. The moderator needs to be objective, knowledgeable on the issue and well versed in group dynamics and consumer or stakeholder behaviour. The participants are reasonably homogenous and unfamiliar with each other. In focus groups for commercial purposes they are normally paid a small sum for attending the focus group. For non commercial purposes the participants often receive a small present. The meeting is typically held in pleasant surroundings and refreshments are served throughout.

Focus groups are a useful exploratory means before designing large scale surveys or campaigns. Consumer goods companies, newspapers, hospitals, and other public service organizations have been using focus groups for years. Increasingly they are used in politics, policymaking and policy implementation. The results of focus groups must not be too easily generalized for the whole market or the whole country, since the sample size is too small and the sample is not drawn randomly. However, they produce a quick method for getting an idea of the feasibility of a proposition or feedback on its implementation.

For a focus group, one needs marketing specialists. That is not always possible. Sometimes simple face to face meetings can help. In Estonia the Union of Estonian Private Forest Associations organized – with the help of an external facilitator - a session with opinion leaders from various stakeholder groups to scope the problem, the context and possible solutions.

In analysing the situation one also should decide how much participation is needed or possible. Any external communication raises expectations. Right from the start it should be clear to external partners or the public at large what degree of participation is envisaged. This often implies that the situation analysis cannot only be carried out on project or middle management level: it has to involve top management, e.g. to decide on the level of participation. Box 4. shows the various modes of participation.

Box 4. Modalities of participation

The forest area manager can involve stakeholders (from low to high) as follows:

- As a client
- As a partner in dialogue
- As a producer of ideas
- As a co-producer of a policy or management plan
- As an agenda-setter
- As a co-responsible (joint management)
- As a decisionmaker

Role of communication

Once the situation analysis provides us with clarity about the issue and its context, we can define the role of communication. This role is different in the stage of preparing a new policy, program, project or approach to solve an issue than in the implementation stage. It is also important to realize that we should not forget about internal communication. Actually internal communication precedes all external communication.

Box 5. The role of strategic communication in management

In preparing a policy, a management plan or an approach to solve an issue:

- methods enabling to optimise creativity and intelligence of the organization to optimise the effectiveness of strategic planning (workshops, meetings, etc.)
- modalities of internal communication to rally the organization around a new policy, management plan or issue (see box 6.)
- methods of external communication to scope fears, emotions, motives and ideas of stakeholders and to involve stakeholders in problem definition and generation of ideas for possible solutions (visits, surveys, focus groups, meetings, interviews etc.)

In implementing a policy, a management plan or an approach to solve an issue:

- modalities of internal communication to rally the organization around the effective implementation of the new policy, management plan or issue (see box 6.)
- methods of external communication to generate public support and involvement in the implementation (joint planning meetings, events, free publicity, round tables, etc.)

Internal communication

It is crucial for the people within the organization to have the right information to perform their tasks effectively. When starting a new project, superiors and colleagues within the organization should be informed. The superiors have to give a go for the project. So they have to be informed on objectives, budget, risks etc. And as we have seen on modes of participation (unclear). Colleagues have to be informed so that they can support the project. A receptionist should be able to answer questions or redirect them to the right specialist. A colleague dealing with the same target group should be able to act as an ambassador for the project. Box 6. shows the various modalities of internal communication.

Box 6. Basic Modalities of Internal Communication

- **In-house Newsletter** (electronic or printed): regularly, short info about recent facts and events, easy to make, reproduce and distribute.
- **Bulletin Boards**: cheap and easy way to distribute info quickly. If placed at a strategic location (near the lift, photocopier, coffee room etc.), they are usually well read. Through bulletin boards one does not reach external or mobile staffs. They often look messy (the media is the message!), so they are not fit for all messages. Now there also exist digital bulletin boards and websites.
- **Meetings**: regular staff and work meetings are a good way to stimulate internal communication. They are useful if they allow for two-way communication: staff should have as much chance to put issues on the agenda as management. Meetings should not only be used to distribute information, but to generate more support in the organisation for its mission, priorities and current campaigns.
- **Skill development**: giving staff the opportunity for training makes them feel more at ease, and most training offers opportunities to develop negotiation and communication skills.

Identifying target groups

Quite often managers in analysing the situation make a long list of stakeholders. It is important though to make a differentiate them. Some are more important than others. Most important are those who are legally or financially decisive for the success of the solution of the issue. And those who are directly affected by the solution. Mostly this are groups. To communicate effectively it is strategic to target not the whole group but the opinion leaders in the group. Once opinion leaders agree, the rest will follow. By knowing the feelings, motives and ideas of opinion leaders, we know them for the whole group. Before communicating with stakeholders, it is important to analyse the target groups. Visits and conversation with opinion leaders can help here. The most difficult is to identify the opinion leaders. Starting with one's own relation networks is mostly the first step. Often it involves quite some 'research'. Meetings of stakeholder groups are also a means to analyse who is an opinion leader: not the one who speaks most, but the one who is listened to most. Box 7. provides some questions for the analysis of target groups.

Box 7. Questions to ask in analysing target groups

- Which target groups are involved? Who is directly affected by the plan or activity?
- What is the composition of these groups in terms of demographical character (age, income, religion, gender, education, lifestyle)
- Which roles and positions can be distinguished?
- Which interests do the target groups have regarding the problem and solutions? Who will benefit? Who will suffer damage or loss?
- Which level of knowledge do they have of the problem and solutions?
- What is the attitude of the target group towards the problem and towards proposed solutions? Can you expect resistance for change?
- Who is not directly involved, but can influence opinions?
- Which relationship does your organisation have with the target groups?
- How do they perceive you?
- What can they do to contribute to the solution of the issue?
- Which communication means do they use?

Identifying communication objectives

It is essential that communication targets are clear, realistic and feasible. Communication targets can range from involvement in problem solving, to attention, knowledge, awareness, motivation, behaviour and skills. In most cases, communication will be used in combination with other instruments to achieve the desired results. Targets should be formulated in a clear and concrete way and should specify which results should be accomplished. Box 8. shows the criteria for the determination of targets.

Box 8. Criteria for the determination of targets

A target should be SMART:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Acceptable
- Realistic
- Time related

Targets should make clear which results one wants to achieve. These results should be realistic and acceptable: the target should motivate to take action (so it should neither be too ambitious or too 'weak'). Also, the target should be specific and measurable; for instance the target '*we want to increase consciousness about biodiversity among private forest owners in the coming years*' is too vague: it will be impossible to determine whether the communication efforts are successful or not. The target '*we want to achieve that 80% of the private forest owners have stopped clear cutting by 2008*' is specific and measurable.

All communication targets are about knowledge, attitudes or behaviour. In this way the communication objectives are different from the overall objectives of the project, program or policy. Box 9. provides an illustration of the three types of communication objectives.

Box 9. The three categories of communication objectives

- **Knowledge:** target groups are not or insufficiently informed. They do not have information about the problem at hand, the cause and effect relationships and potential solutions. For instance: private forest owners do not realise that their management methods will harm the environment and will decrease chances of future income.
- **Attitude:** target groups have the 'wrong' attitude toward the problem concerned or towards potential solutions: For instance, private forest owners have a strong preference of leaving no biomass after any form of cutting and distrust the alternative of leaving biomass.
- **Behaviour:** target groups stick to practices which harm environment or which prevent activities aimed at nature protection and solution of environmental problems while alternatives are available. For instance: private forest owners do their cutting in all seasons, and not only in winter. Thus, the damage to the site and stand, as well as the risk of pest infestation are increased.

Identifying approaches and messages

The communication strategy illustrates the way an organisation aims to achieve the communication targets. The strategy describes fundamental choices about the methods which will be applied. The following questions can guide you when developing a communication strategy:

- Who took the initiative to tackle the problem at hand?
- Is it more effective to communicate directly with the target groups or is it more effective to communicate through intermediaries?
- Is it more effective to focus on sending messages (vertical approach), or is it more effective to initiate a two way process (horizontal approach)?
- Is it more effective to focus on an informative approach (information about functional aspects of the problem), an emotional approach or a combination of both?

When target groups are directly affected by the problem, they are aware of the problem and they already expressed their concerns, communication has a different starting point than in the situation where NGOs or governments wants to tackle a problem the target groups are not aware of. Each situation requires a different strategy. The 'AIDA checklist' can be useful to determine the situation:

- Attention
- Interest
- Desire
- Action

When a target group has attention for and interest in the problem, the strategy focuses on the stimulating the desire to act. When the target group is unaware of the problem, the strategy focuses on getting attention and getting the issue on the agenda.

In many cases it is costly, complex and time consuming to communicate directly with the target group, especially when a large audience has to be reached and when many different target groups are involved. Communication through intermediaries can have the following advantages:

- It can be more economical.
- Intermediaries can have data bases with addresses and figures of the target group, so they can be reached effectively.
- Intermediaries can have support from a large audience or can have grassroots support.
- Intermediaries can have a reliable, solid image for the target group and authority based on expertise.

However there are also disadvantages:

- There can be a lack control on the message
- There can be a lack of control on the way the target group is approached.
- There can be a lack of control on planning and the communication process.

Weighing the pros and cons, for each specific situation an effective strategy can be chosen. In many cases it is most efficient and effective to develop relationships with organisations with similar missions and with organisations with missions and activities which can strengthen ones own mission and activities.

An informative approach focuses on functional information about the problem, the causes and potential solutions, for instance a local NGO distributes a brochure about pollution of the nearby lake and proposed activities to solve the problem. An emotional approach aims to create an image and focuses on communicating values which appeal to the lifestyle and values of specific target groups, for instance a campaign of Greenpeace aiming to give chemical industry a negative image by showing images of enormous industrial complexes which appear frightening and alienating. An action approach focuses on the desired behaviour change of the target group, for instance flyers with information about the damages of littering in a nature park which are handed out to visitors. In the table below, the different approaches is illustrated with concrete communication messages.

Box 10. Approaches in messages	
Approach	Message (example)
Information approach	<i>Stop clear cutting, start selective cutting! It leads to reduction of costs, it saves ecosystems and species for future generations and it reduces the risks of pests and environmental pressures.</i>
Emotional approach	<i>We need to save our forests for future generations, every human being has the right to a healthy environment.</i>
Behaviour approach	<i>Start replanting your pine and spruce area with 20% broadleaf species, do selective cutting during winter time to avoid the spread of spora of <i>Heterobasidium Annosum</i>.</i>

Identifying communication means

A well known slogan of ‘communication guru’ McLuhan ? is: ‘the medium is the message’. It is a fact that the combination of means and messages can either strengthen the effects of communication or weaken it. For instance, when a government distributes brochures to communicate that it values the opinion of citizens, while there is no possibility to react or give input (medium = one-way communication), the message lacks credibility and will have no or adverse effects. On the other hand, when a government official tells the government values the input of citizens during a public hearing during which the citizens have the opportunity to

comment on a draft environmental policy plan (=two way communication), the message will probably have the desired impact.

The most important choice to make is: using face to face or interpersonal communication or mass media. Costs often play an important role. Decisive also maybe what in the perception of the audience is the most credible vehicle for communication. Finally important is what vehicle contributes most to the communication objectives. For example, when private forest owners lack knowledge about a certain issue and the objective is to provide this knowledge, group discussions, symposia or training sessions may be the most effective vehicles. Box 11. shows the various communication means.

Box 11. Communication means	
Personal communication means	Mass media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups • Dialogues, face to face conversation • Group discussions • Conferences • Symposia • Tours • Home visits • Round tables • Exhibitions • Meetings • Workshops. • Telephone calls • E-mail information service (question and answer) • Internet debate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspapers • Press releases • Magazines • Newsletters • Manuals • Brochures, booklets, flyers • Letters • Radio • Tapes • Television • Video • Posters, Stickers, Banners • Billboards • CD Rom • Website

Organisation, planning and budgeting

Whether your communication plan will be effective, depends for a great deal on organisation. A clear division of tasks and responsibilities is essential for success. If these prerequisites are not met, one risks missing vital steps and deadlines. It must be clear how the team will operate and how activities are coordinated. The following questions guide you on organisation and planning, when developing a communication plan

- Which tasks need to be performed during the execution of the communication activities?
- Which persons need to be involved, in which way, during which phases?
- Who is responsible for specific parts of the plan?
- Who coordinates the joint efforts?
- Which milestones can be identified, and who is responsible for checking?

In budgeting the following elements need to be considered:

- Personnel: how many employees are involved and how much time do these employees have to work on the project.

- Personnel: do you need to hire external consultants and experts and if so, how much will this cost?
- Material costs: how much does it cost to design and produce the communication means?
- Distribution costs: how much does it cost to distribute the communication means?
- Media costs: how much does it cost to publish in newspapers, radio and TV?
- Organisational costs: office supplies, mailing costs, telephone costs, copying.
- ‘Safety budget’: unexpected costs (there always are unexpected costs!)

Monitoring and Evaluation

Evaluation is aimed at assessing the effects of your communication efforts. Furthermore, evaluation can also be aimed at judging the processes during the preparation and execution phase (for instance: co-operation with partner organisation, decision making and implementation processes, etc.). When a project or programme is conducted over a longer period of time, measuring and monitoring effects is recommendable. Evaluation serves several purposes:

- Justification of communication efforts for the leaders of your organisation and its’ stakeholders.
- Learning which methods of work are most effective and most efficient so you know which methods can best be applied in the future.
- Learning how you can organise and manage the communication process more effectively in the future.
- Assessing which future steps are necessary considering the results which have been achieved.

Experimenting with strategic communication

The next three chapters show how communication strategies have been developed to communicate biodiversity to private forest owners in Hungary, Estonia and Lithuania. These strategies follow more or less the steps outlined in this chapter. They illustrate the various principles explained above within the different national contexts.

Further reading

Website IUCN Commission on Education and Communication: www.iucn.org/themes/cec/
Sandra Rientjes (editor), *Communicating Nature Conservation*, European Centre for Nature Conservation, Tilburg 2000

GreenCom, Academy for Educational Development, *Heating up Society to take Environmental Action, a guide to effective environmental communication and education*, Washington 2002

Les Robinson, Andreas Glanznig, *Enabling Ecoaction, a handbook for anyone working with the public on conservation*, Humane Society, WWF Australia, IUCN, Sydney 2003