

Communicating with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs)

Guide for Civil Society
Organizations

Yemisi Ransome-Kuti

Executive Director (NNNGO)

Oyebisi Babatunde Oluseyi

Coordinator: Membership, Advocacy and
Campaigns (NNNGO)

Nigeria Network of NGOs
25 Ogunlana Drive,
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria
E: nnngo@nnngo.org
W: www.nnngo.org

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Introduction

Communication amongst people is a process in which everyone receives, sends, interprets, and infers information, all at the same time on a continuous basis.

It is common for two people not to understand each other. Often, without even knowing it, we hold certain misconceptions about how to communicate with one another. These misconceptions create barriers to engaging in effective exchange and genuine conversation.

Too often in our conversations, we talk to each other but don't listen attentively. We are often distracted, half listening, half thinking about something else or formulating an answer.

Communicating with Chief Executives, a Guide for Civil society organizations (CSOs) was developed to assist CSOs in effectively communicating with chief executives of corporate organizations, donor agencies, and governments.

Partnerships between the private sector, donor agencies, governments, and civil society to address development challenges are on the increase. Today, this approach is probably the most effective and promising way to address complex social problems that call upon our skill, knowledge, and experience of a wide range of stakeholders in order to ensure successful and sustainable engagement. Effective communication is critical in this regard.

This guide was born out of the belief that if CSOs communicate effectively with all stakeholders in the development process there will be an increase in the number, quality, and impact of our partnerships. Through our experience as development actors, we have tried to create a product that helps CSOs

prepare themselves for communicating with executives.

Since organizational communication takes place between individuals, we will be addressing communications with executives from this perspective.

Interpersonal Communication

To communicate effectively, in other words, to understand and be understood by others, is a set of skills to be learned and practiced. Many of us hold some common misconceptions about the art of communicating.

These misconceptions create barriers to engaging in effective exchange and genuine conversation. Below is a list of the common misconceptions we can hold about communication.

"If I say it, the other person will understand."

This may not necessarily follow. The receiver of a message ascribes meaning, so saying it doesn't mean that others understand the message. We need to check to see if the target also understands the meaning of our message as intended.

"Communication is a natural ability – some have it, some don't."

Communication is not an innate ability. We can acquire the art of skillful communication with practice. There are some very simple tips that can dramatically increase how you understand others and are understood. Try them out and see for yourself if anything changes. (Adapted from Johnson, Reaching Out, 2003)

Becoming more aware of our own "habits of mind" about communication could help increase our effectiveness at communicating with executives.

Although interpersonal communication requires at least two people, the most important place to begin is with you. Being open with another person starts with being aware of who you are and what you are. **Perception is everything.**

Self-awareness helps you identify the actions required to behave competently in different situations. Key areas of self-awareness include:

- a. **Personality** - Awareness of your personality helps you analyze appropriately in decision making.
- b. **Values** – Have you made an emotional investment in the beliefs which you hold? For example, if you value respect, you will make sure that you and your teammates are treated with fairness and courtesy.
- c. **Habits** - Although we would like to possess the habits that help us interact effectively with and manage others, we can probably all identify at least one of our habits that decrease our effectiveness.
- d. **Needs** - Needs create motivation; and when needs are not satisfied, they can cause frustration, conflict and stress.
- e. **Emotions** - by acknowledging your own feelings such as anger, happiness, fear, or surprise, what causes them, and how they influence your thoughts and actions is a fundamental step in becoming self-aware.

Communicating Effectively

How do you send messages effectively? Taking into account your organizations vision, mission and objectives, what can you do to ensure effective communication of your organizations ideas and vision?

Trust is especially necessary for open and effective communication. When we have a high degree of trust in the other person, we tend to be willing to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Trust simplifies our interactions by giving us confidence in other people's words and deeds. On the other hand, a lack of trust reduces the amount of information the sender shares and increases the receiver's suspicion of what little information we communicate.

The culture of mutual suspicion that exists between development stakeholders must be "improved dramatically" in order to facilitate effective communication.

When communicating use the word "**We**" remembering that you are representing an organization, these helps in making your statements powerful and influential.

Provide evidence based reports, not your feelings, or what you think. We can achieve this through pictures and short video presentations in a non-judgmental or evaluative manner.

Your body language accounts for more than 60% of your message - verbal and physical congruence will build trust and clarify your intent.

Listening and responding

Too often in our conversations, we talk to each other but don't listen attentively. We are often distracted, half listening, half thinking about something else or formulating an answer.

Listening and responding is how we understand the feelings and thoughts of the other person. There is no skill more important for effective communication than taking into consideration the other person's perspective. Try standing in someone else's shoes; it will considerably improve your communication with that person.

Understanding your audience

Understanding your audience is the key to tailoring all of your communication more effectively. Your message may seem clear and obvious to you, but what you put in doesn't always get processed the way you expect it to.

Your perceptions are true for you but may be very different for someone else, even someone who is close. For example, they may have completely different memories of a past incident that you shared. This reality is true for them even though it's not for you.

Communication is not only about conveying information - it is also about developing relationships and building trust with your target audience.

Developing more effective relationships and trust with your audience takes time and resources, but some key tips can help improve the effectiveness of your communication. All the good work that has gone into a piece of writing/presentation can be wasted by one word in the first paragraph that the audience

does not understand or that puts them off. To avoid this, you can:

Spend time finding out the key group/individuals that you need to engage right from the beginning, and at particular points along the way.

Tips for listening and responding

1. Focus on what is being said – tune out distractions
2. Look for non-verbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions or body postures
3. Listening is about the other, not you. Try to refrain from forming your response before you have even heard what the other is saying
4. Clarify and ask pointed questions to help you understand what is being said
5. Paraphrase: restate in your own words, what the person says, feels and means
6. Try to understand the message from the sender's perspective: "So if I understand you...."

Don't assume you have the correct knowledge about others - empathy is gained through genuine understanding of other people's point of view.

Research your target audience on their website, publications such as annual reports,

newspaper articles and other publications or through interviews/conversations with relevant individuals.

Communicating with executives can be through:

1. Letters/Memos
2. Telephone conversations
3. Publications such as policy briefs and newspaper articles, videos etc
4. Face to face meetings

Pre-testing your communication to be sure it addresses the following questions will assist in communicating effectively with your audience:

- What is the main idea we are trying to get across?
- What does this document/presentation ask the target audience to do?
- Is there anything in the document that is confusing?

- Which of these phrases best describes the document? [Easy to understand/Hard to understand]
- Is there anything in particular worth remembering about the document?
- What, if anything, do you particularly like about the document?
- Is there anything in the document that you particularly dislike or that bothers you? If yes, what?
- In your opinion, is there anything in the document that is hard to believe? If yes, what?
- In your opinion, what type of person is this document talking to? [Someone like me/Someone different to me]

Preparing to meet an Executive

Don't Meet

Avoid a meeting if the same information could be covered in a memo, e-mail or brief report.

Set Objectives for the Meeting

Before planning the agenda, determine the objective of the meeting. The more concrete your objectives, the more focused your agenda will be.

Provide an Agenda Beforehand

Your agenda needs to include a one-sentence description of the meeting objectives, a list of the topics to be covered and a list stating who will address each topic for how long. Follow the agenda closely during the meeting.

Assign Meeting Preparation

Give all participants something to prepare for the meeting, and that meeting will take on a new significance to each group member.

Assign Action Items

Don't finish any discussion in the meeting without deciding how and when to act on it. Follow up and sustain pressure until objectives have been achieved or some resolution reached.

Examine Your Meeting Process

Don't leave the meeting without assessing what took place and making a plan to improve the next meeting.

Organizational branding

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers.

Therefore, it makes sense to understand that branding is not about getting your target market to choose you over the competition, but it is about getting your prospects to see you as the only one that provides a solution to their problem.

It is within this framework that communications about your organization should be carved. A good organizational branding will help you:

- Deliver your message clearly
- Confirm your credibility
- Connect your target audience emotionally
- Motivate your audience

Your brand resides within the hearts and minds of customers, clients, and prospects. It is the sum total of their experiences and perceptions, some of which you can influence, and some that you cannot.

Remember - Integrity, professionalism and a good image is something you cannot afford to lose. Once it's gone it is very difficult, sometimes impossible to regain.

References

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