

COMMUNITY BUILDING

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

Communication

Effective community communication is essential for building public support for community projects and activities, and for developing a sense of community. Open, positive and respectful communication helps build commitment and trust in a community, leading to increase interest, support and involvement in community life. It's very difficult for community members to get involved if they don't know what's going on. Often residents are amazed at the amount of activity going on in their communities about which they know very little.

Whether at the community level of one-on-one, communication is most effective when its "two-way." Two-way communication involves the exchange of information through talking and listening. At the community level, this involves providing information and asking for feedback.

In communities, the media is often a useful way to supply the public with information. The media can inform the public of upcoming community meetings, activities and events, and report on events afterwards. Effective use of the media allows individuals/groups/institutions to communicate to community members what they are doing and why. Media tools include print (newspapers, newsletters, magazines); radio (public, private, Public Service Announcements (PSAs), and, television (local, cable access, PSAs).

Other methods of providing information at the community level include websites, bulletin boards, posters, school and public libraries, direct mail brochures, church/school newsletters, and community newspapers.

Whatever the size of community or project, community members will always need to ask questions, raise concerns, express opinions and provide input. To realize effective community communication, the community should provide its members with ways to give feedback. These could include public comment periods before, during and after public meetings, conducting community surveys, hosting facilitated public dialogues or community forums, brown bag lunches with officials, suggestion boxes situated around town or e-mail links to town officials. Many times, once information is exchanged, citizen involvement in local activities will increase and resources will be developed.

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The primary units of most communities are:

- (1) Individual community members
- (2) Groups of individuals, such as youth, seniors or parents
- (3) Organizations such as the Conservation Commission or civic groups such as Rotary
- (4) Institutions, such as schools, government or churches

Effective communication is essential for building groups/organizations/institutions of all sizes within a community, whether a local 4-H club or a volunteer fire department. At the group level, members have to develop a communication system to keep each other informed. A clearly established communication network is key to a group's success. In smaller groups, it could include phone calls, meetings and correspondence. Effective communication and group size are directly related. The larger the group, the less realistic one-on-one, direct, personal communication tends to be. In large groups, and ultimately a community, other strategies for communication have to be implemented to ensure all members are kept informed. These include using the media, newsletters, posters, flyers, bulletin boards, direct mail brochures and websites. However, a clearly established communication network is still key for success.

To be really effective, all groups within a community must have access to community information. These may include the disabled, minorities, unemployed, parents, youth, elderly, businesses, civic organizations, government officials, law enforcement, commuters, seasonal residents, year-round residents, landowners, renters or farmers. An effective community communication network should include all the different groups in town, taking into consideration the unique circumstances for each group in how they access information and the information they need or want.

Communities don't exist in isolation. At the very least, they are part of a region, county, state and nation. Regardless of their locale – rural, suburban, urban – communities are interdependent and overlap with others. Circumstances could include sharing school systems, pollution sources, resources such as emergency services and natural resources/features such as watersheds, with neighboring communities. For all involved communities to be kept informed, communities must establish communication linkages with each other.

To be effective, communication must occur on many levels, within and between these units: different communities, different groups/organizations/institutions in a community, members of a group/organization/institution, groups/organizations/institutions and individual community members, groups/organizations/institutions and the collective community, individual community members, and so on.

Frequent effective community communication is the key to keeping community members connected, informed, involved, interested and supportive of issues, projects and activities.

Resources:

Building Communities from the Grassroots – Community Development Academy, University of Missouri.