Do I Look Like I Understand?: Effectively Communicating Budget, Finance and Other Complex Issues

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Today’s Agenda
✔ Creating our Foundation – Core Thoughts on Becoming Effective Communicators
✔ Definition of Complex Issues
✔ Core Components of Communicating Complex Issues
✔ Steps to Understanding – Going from “Huh” to “I Got It”
✔ Ideas on How to be a More Effective Communicator
The person who is communicating has a responsibility for helping others to understand.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

Often attributed to George Bernard Shaw

Core

Creating our Foundation – Core Thoughts to Understanding

Core Thought #1

"It's complicated" cannot be the reason that we pass on effectively communicating complex issues. You have a responsibility to guide your audience to understanding. If I'm trying to explain something and you don't follow me, it's not your job to catch up – it's my job to bring you along.
Core Thought #2

It is essential to stay engaged with the person we hope will understand us by listening, observing, and being aware of how they are processing what we are communicating. Tracking their ability to follow you is a key part of communicating and developing deep understanding.

Core Thought #3

Jargon and undefined terms can be roadblocks to understanding. It is acceptable to use jargon as long as the people you are communicating with know exactly what you mean by using a particular term.

Core Thought #4

Listening is essential to effective communication. By checking in with your audience, you will be able to better adjust how and what you are communicating. The understanding of complex issues is impossible without listening as part of the communication process.
Definition

Minnesota Association of School Business Officials

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Complex Issues:

✔ Are multi-faceted
✔ Are difficult to understand because they stem from topics that are by nature complicated and complex
✔ Are more easily understood through metaphors and stories
✔ Often have “tails” and can be long lasting
✔ Are often the key to understanding other issues
✔ Can lead to other problems if not understood

Core

Components of Communicating Complex Issues

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Communicating complex issues requires four major components:

✔ Time
✔ Context
✔ Repetition
✔ Message focus and layering

Component #1 – Time

Many issues in public education – especially financial and other complex issues – cannot be effectively summarized by sharing the messages once or twice. It is essential that an adequate amount of time be planned and allocated so the messages can be shared over time in a way that is easy to understand.

Component #2 – Context

The context of an issue provides background information that leads to deeper understanding. Context can include how the issue connects with other issues, and how issues and messages may overlap. Understanding is more likely when people know how an issue interrelates with other topics.
**Component #3 – Repetition**

Most people need to hear messages multiple times before they are remembered and can be recalled. Messages that are intended to communicate complex issues need to be repeated and communicated several times to be understood. And when your communication is most effective, your audience begins repeating your messages.

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**Component #4 – Message Focus & Layering**

Layering is a key part of effective communication. One part of this planning process is to identify the key messages that need to be communicated. It’s challenging to communicate all parts of a complex issue at once or in a short time. Layering of messages allows people to understand information over time without being overwhelmed.

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**Huh?**

Steps of Understanding – Going from “Huh?” to “I Got It”
Steps of Understanding:

- Messages – what am I communicating?
- Audiences – what groups and individuals am I targeting?
- Strategies – how will I deliver my messages and know if I am effectively communicating?

Messages – What am I Communicating?

A key message is a significant idea or thought you want your audience to know, understand, remember, and – if you’re lucky – repeat. Using key messages will help you to frame an issue from your perspective and will lead to greater understanding.

Audiences – What Groups and Individuals am I Targeting?

Identifying and knowing your audiences helps you to understand their needs and what they need to know. Especially with complex issues, the depth of what a particular audience needs to know may vary from other audiences. Knowing your audience will help you to more effectively craft your messages.
Strategies – How do I Deliver my Messages and Know if I am Effectively Communicating?

If you know your messages and audiences, the next step is to determine how to deliver the message. You will likely have multiple strategies but may have one primary strategy. A key part of implementing any communication strategy is having feedback opportunities to assess understanding and to make sure your audience is staying with you.

Ideas

On How to be a More Effective Communicator

Idea #1 – Frame First

The first person or organization that frames an issue puts others in the position to counter the initial framing, and are forced to try to reframe the issue, which is difficult, if not impossible. In other words, it is usually best to be the first to communicate rather than to respond to how someone else has framed an issue.
Idea #2 – What’s in it for Me?

Most audiences don’t pay attention to an issue unless they can quickly see how the issue affects them. In communicating with audiences, it is important to outline how a particular issue affects an individual or audience.

Idea #3 – Get on their Radar Screen

It is next to impossible to expect to effectively communicate a complex issue if your audience is not paying attention to you. Again, helping them understand the “what’s in it for me” will get their attention, along with ongoing communication that they can rely on. If you are seen as a trusted source of information, they will listen.

Idea #4 – Connect the Information Silos

It is essential to help people see how issues connect and are interrelated, not just in a way to provide context. Show them how budget reductions, teacher negotiations, and legislative decisions, seeing the big picture will help your audiences to see the importance of what you are trying to communicate.
Idea #5 – Define Jargon or Find Other Words

Jargon can be a barrier to understanding. If it is necessary to use jargon or a complicated term, it is essential to define it. Simpler words are always preferred, but not always possible.

Idea #6 – Use Metaphors

By using metaphors, you can relate a complex issue to something more familiar. Big, complicated, education-related issues can more easily be understood when placed in a different context.

Idea #7 – Tell Stories

The human brain loves stories and most people can connect better to information when it is framed in the form of a story. Rather than just communicating data, relate information about complex issues to how it affects children or what is happening in the classroom.