

Writing Policies for multiple stakeholders

By Donna Dark, your governance guide (Lighthouse Advisory Services)

Writing policies is never easy. Finding the balance between including necessary content for compliance, delivering a clear message, providing direction, and keeping within the rules or style of your organisation's documents can be a fine balance.

The new challenge – writing for multiple stakeholders

“But I’ve always been writing for multiple stakeholders!”

Yes, you have, but this expectation has now increased.

The need to take a consumer centred focus has led to the (reasonable) expectation that consumers and their representatives can read and access organisational policies relevant to them. This expectation has existed for some time in the areas of privacy and complaint management, but for aged care and disability it now extends into the areas of incident management — specifically the reporting and management of reportable incidents.

In parallel with this consumer expectation is an increased (but not new) requirement permeating through the National Aged Care Quality Standards that policy and procedures are understood throughout the organisation. This has always been the case, but the new standards test this assumption much more thoroughly, and at all levels of governance.

These combined expectations give us an opportunity to rethink the way we write policies and procedures for all stakeholders.

With increased transparency of our policies and procedures being available to consumers and their families comes increased expectation that what we do aligns with what we say. We also want to ensure that policies and procedures are understood in all areas of our organisation and can be used by staff to guide them so that we can demonstrate that we do what we say.

Critical reflection exercise

Questions to consider when reviewing your policies and procedures may include the following:

Area	Questions
Governance	Who is the owner of this policy/procedure for the organisation? Is it clear what groups have responsibilities and accountabilities in this document? Are there any key compliance requirements that must be covered?
Purpose	What is the critical message the organisation needs (and wants) to convey?
Stakeholders	Who are the stakeholder groups that can <i>read/access</i> this policy/procedure? Who are the stakeholder groups that need to <i>follow</i> this policy/procedure? What do I need to consider about each of these groups in writing this document?

Area	Questions
	Who could I consult with from these stakeholder groups to make sure I am/we are getting the key messages across?
Readability	Is the main body clear and concise for all stakeholder groups? <i>Could I follow it as an outsider to the organisation? What about if I was a new employee? A Board member?</i> Can I use flowcharts or diagrams to better explain this information? Can I include some information as an attachment or appendix specifically for certain stakeholder groups?
Consistency and linkages	How does it fit with other policies and procedures in the organisation? Is there consistency in messages and content across these documents?
Approach and tone	Does the tone and approach support the organisation's relationships with its stakeholders, its purpose and organisational culture? <i>Not sure – ask a new employee or an outsider!</i>

Knowing where to start

I get asked this question a lot when you have many competing demands and a limited amount of time. My advice is to look for the noise.

What are the areas that are causing the most confusion or distress to your internal and external stakeholders?

Do you know where you have practice that is inconsistent to your policy?

Do you know where practice has moved past policy (and now the policy needs to catch up)?

What lessons have you learned from complaints and incidents that could have been resolved or avoided if you had made the message and direction clearer?

Start there. Start today. Just start.

“One may walk over the highest mountains one step at a time”.

John Wanamaker.