



How not to get stuck in 'Teflon' messaging

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'Why don't people listen?' 'I sent two emails and no-one got back to me.' 'I presented the new protocol at the meeting, but no-one's following it.' 'Only 5 people have responded to our survey, even when I told them how important it is...' 'It's 'poor communication'...' etc, etc, etc...

How many times have you heard these words come out of your own mouth? How many times have you heard others in your team utter the same words, accompanied by the grating of grinding teeth?

Health and human service professionals are generally not also communications experts, in the same way that communications experts are generally not also health professionals (apart from the occasional crossover.) But for some reason, we think that we can handle our own comms anyway. I say, you listen, you hear, you act - right? Wrong! I couldn't count the number of messages I've put out into the various organisations over the years, as a quality manager and director. Many sank without trace. Until...

Until I acknowledged I had no idea what I was doing!

Much of my messaging was based on assumptions - that people read, listened to and understood everything I was saying; that people wanted to hear my messages; that people wanted to do what I asked; that everyone thought like me.

Really bad assumptions.

I've been watching this in acute health - and now in other human services - for years. Poor messaging is the enemy of good implementation. Not too long ago, a quality manager was complaining that no-one had acted on an important missive about an upcoming accreditation, sent out a month ago. She had just found out and was now both upset that she'd been ignored and behind where she thought she was in her accreditation preparations.

I asked her how she'd got the message across. 'I sent an email' she replied. Then she looked at me with an astonished expression. 'Can you *believe* that some people don't read *all* their emails?' I asked if this was always a problem with the emails she sent. She nodded.

If I hadn't been experiencing the empathy that flows from having been in the exact same situation many times in my career, I would have laughed. Not at her, but at how slow to learn we human beings can be. Especially when our messages are related to the things we think are highly important, such as accreditation. Especially when they are supposed to be doing what we're asking them to do (which introduces a power struggle into the equation, something else guaranteed to kill cooperation.) Especially when we're expressing it completely clearly using no jargon at all...well, maybe just a little...

Every system is perfectly designed to get the result it gets. And if we do what we always do, we get what we've always got. When was the last time you re-thought the way you get your messages across to staff and consumers? Got some expert input? Learned a new way? It's easy to get stuck in 'Teflon messaging': basically throwing a spaghetti of words at a wall of staff and being surprised when it slides off their brains without leaving a trace. And doing exactly the same thing next time.

But! - it doesn't have to be this way. Getting a message across so it has the desired effect requires some specific skills. Anyone can send a message. But only those who have at least some idea of effective messaging have any chance of that message landing the way we want to.

So, want to improve your success rate? Make change and improvement implementation a little easier? Grind your teeth less? Here's a model that should increase both message understanding and message action. These tips relate to messaging when you need others to take action and apply to all the media you use for getting messages out: presentations, videos, emails, newsletters, posters, texts, social media posts... It's well worth getting your head around these, so you can get others' heads around your stuff!

FIRST! Accept that the onus is on you to create a message that sticks with your audience. It's not their responsibility to figure it out!

Be super clear about why you're sending information out in the first place. If you don't know what you want them to do with it, neither will they! Why are you sending this particular group of people this message? If you don't know that - don't send it. 'For information' or 'to raise awareness' is not an answer. Think of all the demands on people's attention. No-one has the brain space to pay any attention to 'for info' anymore.

Then, craft your message to make it 'stick' in your audience's minds and motivate them to act on it. **You want your audience to:**

•**Pay Attention** to the message: because it's relevant to them and presented in a way that is interesting and makes them look twice.

Include something **unexpected to grab their eyes and/or ears**. Unusual or fun fact? Pose a question they would be curious about the answer to? Something that shows empathy towards them

and gives them hope for a better tomorrow? (Have you ever wished Audit X didn't take an hour to complete? Well, now it doesn't have to!)

Then...

•**Understand the message**: because it's real and clear and doesn't assume the audience is reading your mind.

Include something **concrete** - don't use jargon or concepts but describe exactly why you're sending them the information. Use examples, images, videos or experiences. You can describe the feeling of putting your hand in a bucket of ice; you can show an image or video of someone's reaction when they put their hand in a bucket of ice, or you can actually put their hand in a bucket of ice. And the impact winner is...?

Then...

•**Remember it**: so make sure your request is backed up by credible, interesting facts, giving them something to think about and chew over - something they might share with colleagues.

Include something **rational** such as objective data that describes why this issue is important.

Then...

•**Care about it** so they want to take action: tell a story or give an example of how this impacts on them, consumers or staff.

Include some **feelings**, such as staff or consumer impact or experience. (Information drives understanding but *feelings drive action*.)

Then...

Act: because the request for action in the message is simple and clear and doesn't demand too much of them. And you've laid the groundwork in the rest of your message for them to be interested and care about what happens.

Lay out an **action path** that's easy to follow. Show that you're trying to make action as easy as possible. Give an example of someone else who has already taken this action, showing the easy steps and the benefit.

Then...

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat. That whole 'tell them seven times' saying is just so your message is heard - if you want them to act, try reinforcing it in different ways - seventeen times!

Next time you're watching advertising - wherever it may be - look out for these techniques. Soon you'll start to see them everywhere - and be able to pick where they're used well and where they're missing the mark (vaccination advertising, anyone?)

Aged care - and all human services - learn from acute care's (and my) mistakes and don't spend years figuring out there's a better way! Obviously, I'm describing the tip of the 'top tips' iceberg here. The more you learn, the more powerful your messages will be. The more powerful the message, the more progress you make and the less frustrating your work life will be. It's worth investing some time to skill up in the art of effective messaging - it will change your professional life. I recommend the books and videos by the Heath Brothers - see ref, below. Or - cut out the middle person and find a professional to help!

Reference

Adapted from Heath D and Heath C. 'Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die.'
Random House, USA, 2007.

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