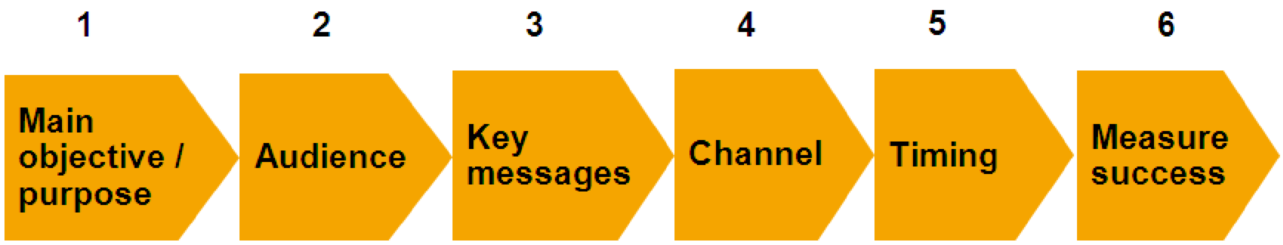
Communication strategies: getting the message across

facilitated by Ulrike von Lonski, Director of Communications of the World Petroleum Council

In order to get your message across, a series of steps should be followed. The tool used and presented by Ulrike von Lonski is called the “Communication planning tool”. It aims to be adaptable to every need of communication you may experience (internal, external, large-scale, or other).



The *first* element to work on is the main objective. What is it you want to achieve? This step can take some time and it is important not to rush it. Indeed, this first element will influence the rest of your thinking process.

Once your objective is clearly stated in one single sentence, you should *then* determine the recipient. Who is it targeted to? It can for instance be the experts of a particular field, the general public, employees of your organization, or the people looking for information on a particular question. You could have more than one audience, in which case you would need to develop a different chain of thinking for each group of audience (with possibly different messages, channels and timing).

The *third* step consists in elaborating the actual messages you want to get across. What is it you actually want to say? You should select 3 to 5 of them (not more) and try to keep them short, relevant, simple, memorable and clear.

Fourthly, you should decide which channel to use. How to reach your audience? Among the possibilities: organize a seminar, issue a publication, create a website, distribute flyers or display posters. You could either use several channels or focus on one. Of course, to determine the best channels to use, you should base your reflections on your audience specifications.

The last element of your analysis is about timing. Is there a better time to send out a piece of information? It can for instance be the case if there is a special day or event dedicated to the theme you wish to communicate about. Or if you organize an event, you might want to create a calendar of communication actions.

Now that you have your communication strategy, the last task consists in evaluating its effect. Did people get the message? There is almost always a way to measure objectively the success of your strategy: counting the number of downloads, see if you reach the aimed number of participants to your conference, etc.

In conclusion, to have an efficient communication strategy, you should try to follow those 6 steps in the **right order,** always starting by establishing your purpose and keeping in mind you should always be **clear**, **consistent**, **connected**, and **coordinated.**

Volunteer driven organizations – is a professional approach possible?

facilitated by Valentin Dupouey, Chair of the International Committee for Education of the Erasmus Student Network

International associations are very diverse in size, functioning, resources, cultures, etc. However, a vast majority of them share common challenges connected to their governance model. One of these challenges is the presence of volunteers at all levels of the organization and their interaction with professional staff. The relationship between an elected volunteer board, professional staff and grassroots volunteers raises many questions and poses challenges for the professional running of every NGO.

The workshop sought to address some of these questions and to find leads to help both volunteers and staff foster a better relationship for a better running of their organizations.

The challenges/questions were divided into 7 categories:

1. Collaborative work and tools, and communication
2. Feeling of belonging to the organization
3. Knowledge transfer and transition
4. Board/Staff relationship
5. Building future leadership
6. Engaging volunteers (recruit, train, reward)
7. Understand motivations and drivers

These were analyzed, discussed and reflected on in small groups during the workshop and each group reported at the end of the workshop session. Boards, paper and post-it were used during the workshops

1. Collaborative work and tools, and communication

- Decide on a set of basic collaborative tools to use (GoogleDrive shared documents, Skype, Trello, Doodle should cover most of your need for the daily management of your organization) and make sure that everybody knows when to use each tool (internal guidelines)
- If some members are reluctant to use them, provide some very basic training on how to use the tools (organize a webinar to explain to very basics): don't forget to adapt the training "for dummies". Never overestimate the ICT knowledge in your organization.
- Convince all your organization bodies of the benefits (resources, efficiency, user-friendliness) of using these tools
- Make sure every meeting, even on skype, has a clear agenda and a designated minute-taker. Ideally take minutes on a shared google doc so everyone can follow at the same time.
- Use Trello (task list manager) to assign task, set deadlines, show progress

2. Feeling of belonging to the organization

- Do you have an engaging visual identity? A logo people are proud to share and show? Do you print gadgets, materials (t-shirts for example) that people can wear to associate themselves with your organization?
- Are you organizing regular gatherings of your members from all levels of your organization?
- Are you highlighting some of the past achievements of your organization? Are you highlighting stories of successful individuals in your organization?
- Is the mission and vision of your organization clear and concrete enough to be relevant for your individual members?

3. Knowledge transfer and transition

- Maintain archives online and offline, with precisely named folders and files
- Set up an online platform accessible by all your members where a wide range of documents can be consulted: strategic and budgetary documents, project reports (checklist, do's and don'ts), minutes of meetings, contacts.
- Prepare a transition checklist before electing new board members and ensure the transition checklist is followed during a well-defined 'transition period' between two board members
- Prepare a 'new member guide' to guide your newly joined volunteers through their first steps in your organization
- Make sure each new member have a more experienced contact person ('buddy', 'mentor') in the organization

4. Building future leadership

- Make sure, your organization's leaders remain close to the grassroots level and are easily approachable. In that way, they'll inspire future leaders more easily.
- Make board positions attractive: interesting tasks and challenges, strong support groups around you, clear opportunities to grow and develop. You'll attract dynamic and challenge-minded people.
- Don't impose top-down processes in your organization. They'll create a disconnect with your base and they'll prevent future leaders from becoming involved
- Clarify the tasks your position involves, the skills it requires, the skills you have developed
- Identify the most engaged individuals and allow them to grow through increased responsibilities

5. Board/Staff relationship

- Ensure each staff member knows who to turn to, each board member knows who to turn to in all situations
- There's a comprehensive list of tasks and responsibilities for both staff and board. In case of overlap, both staff and board know where the overlap is.
- Acknowledge the need to adjust working style (hours, tools, involvement) between staff and board.
- Organize joint team building activities for staff and board can help foster better understanding.

6. Engaging volunteers

- Make sure your organization offers a wide range of possibilities when it comes to voluntary engagement (project management, communication, policy work) and that your volunteers are offered room for development (networking opportunities, opportunities to grow in your organization)
- Thank your volunteers often, for small tasks and big achievements equally.
- Reward volunteers with team building activities, celebrate successes
- Apply good governance principles in your organization: volunteers will find a safe and engaging environment if your organization is governed under the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability and inclusion of stakeholders.
- Make sure your volunteers can contribute to the drive of your organization by consulting them
- Always highlight the fun part of what you/they are doing
- Offer online and offline training opportunities
- Develop a mentoring system within your volunteers

7. Understand motivations and drivers

- Make sure all your members can express their motivation. By knowing them you'll be able to address them more precisely.
- Be open to discuss your volunteers' motivation on a regular basis, and the way to make sure these motivations are addressed

With thanks to Valentin who helped us explore these questions in a creative, dynamic and innovative way.

Legal matters affecting the work of international associations
facilitated by Marleen Denef, partner, and Sarah Verschaeve, counsel, from Curia

Topics covered in the workshop were:

1. What defines international associations: social impact vs financial impact?
2. Engaging in commercial activities as a source of income: issues and risks
3. Good governance
    a. Composition of the board of directors
    b. Interaction between governance bodies
4. Partnering with a (commercial) company
5. The multi-tasking CEO/board member
6. Ensuring practical governance
7. Privacy

Marlene and Sarah gave an overall view of these topics as relating to international associations under the legal framework in Belgium.

Discussion points following the presentation included:

- Making surplus money from workshop fees, and re-directing the surplus into future workshops? One answer could be to offer grants to future attendees who may not otherwise be able to afford it.

- The development of social impact bonds investing in Belgium.

- If a board member is not allowed to work for profit can the association still partner with a commercial organization? Yes, depending on the association's statutes.

- Is crowdfunding for specific projects allowed? It depends on the platform organization to make sure it is a gift and not capital. Choose a crowdfunding platform with good credentials.

- Privacy issues and using information from receipt of business cards? One may use this information to contact the giver, but may not pass this information to third parties without his/her knowledge

Thank you to Marlene and Sarah for presenting the information clearly and simply, making a complicated subject easy to understand. The audience were engaged and had more questions than time allowed.

VAT issues for international associations
facilitated by Philippe Noirhomme, Fiscal consultant working with the Belgian VAT Desk

In Philippe Noirhomme's two highly informative sessions he showed us a good understanding of the daily work and activities of associations, plus the meetings and events they organize, and he tailored his talk specifically to their interests and preoccupations. He proved that his knowledge was both wide and detailed, demonstrating also that he listened carefully to points raised by his audience.

He described the most frequent "normal" position for an association as a "fully taxable person", charging and recovering VAT (value added tax). As he went on to discuss exemptions, the general rule became clearer (as in French grammar when the exceptions shed light on the regularities). For day-to-day functioning, tax is based on the system of the country in which the main management decisions are taken, where the association should be registered for VAT. There is a distinction between services and products, and between services rendered on behalf of all the members together or individually to some, and Philippe was at pains to stress that services bought from a country outside the association's own should be treated carefully to avoid double taxation.

Events, he continued, are subject to the regulations of the country where the event takes place, and the association needs to register for VAT in that country, and probably de-register after the event. Conference fees charged to participants are all subject to VAT, according to the regulations of the place of the event, although sponsorship should not have VAT charged as the sponsor is required to self-assess in his own country. Recovery of conference costs vary from one country to another, and the rules covering exhibitions depend on the range of services provided. Use of PCOs raises another set of reflections. VAT is operational in all EU countries, although the rates and rules vary, and it also exists in a number of other countries, with similar principles but individual rules. Subsidies and grants are or are not subject to VAT depending on the purpose and conditions: if VAT has been charged the association should be able to recover it, but for a gift VAT is neither charged nor recovered.

The topic did not lend itself to discussion in groups, and participants chose this workshop because they felt a need for serious information. The workshop helped them determine what questions they should ask in order to have their affairs in good order. Philippe showed a very small number of slides pared down to essential headings and the sessions were highly interactive with many inquiries to the speaker, to which he responded admirably. In the morning the participants were mainly from European-based associations, but in the afternoon several participants represented organizations outside Europe or suppliers of services. The wide variety of queries and points raised indicated yet again that trying to match associations into a business-based system is akin to putting an octopus into a string bag: there is usually a part that does not fit.