

APRIL 2009

SPEAK TO THE PEOPLE

Communicate with Members

Why communication is important

Effective communication is essential to informing, motivating and mobilizing our OSSTF/FEESO members. We cannot engage members in union affairs, bargaining, sanctions, or political actions without first getting their attention.

Communication is a two-way street. To represent members, defend their interests and enlist their support, OSSTF/FEESO and its leaders must also hear what our members have to say about their needs and concerns.

Some tips for successful communication

Every method of communication has advantages and weaknesses and it is important to learn how to use each most effectively. General advice that applies to all methods includes:

- **Keep to a regular timetable:**

Unless you are dealing with a crisis, stick to an established pattern for meetings, emails and newsletters. Members are more likely to respond to communications if it comes when expected. Establishing a regular cycle also allows you to space messages appropriately and to use different approaches to reinforce what you are saying over time.

- **Repeat important messages:**

Members may need to see or hear your message several times before they "get it."

- **Be timely and relevant:**

People will ignore communications if information is last minute, out of date or not related to their concerns.

- **Stick to the point:**

Remember members are busy with many other things competing for their attention. Whether speaking or writing, keep your information or message succinct and informative.

- **Make it attractive and easy to grasp:**

This refers to style and format. Not every message is pleasant, but the way it is delivered can make a real difference in whether it is received at all. Pay attention to the graphic elements and layout of printed and electronic materials. For meetings, organize talking points so they are logical and clear. Don't try to cram in too much material. Put the most important issues first. Keep your message as straightforward as possible. Offer backup materials or opportunities for clarification if the matter is technical or complicated.

- **Recognize others:**

Remember to credit the contributions of others. This includes acknowledging artists/photographers/web designers who may be involved, as well as citing sources of information and inspiration.

- **Remember who we are:**

It is important to remember we are communicating as Federation representatives and education workers. Use language and a tone that is appropriate and will not deter members from paying attention. Remember also that what is said may be used elsewhere.

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Beware of Employer-Owned/Operated Communications Systems

Systems such as employer email, fax machines and courier mail service belong to and may be monitored by the employer. The employer may also attempt to restrict or cut off use, especially during negotiations. OSSTF/FEESO districts and bargaining units are strongly encouraged to be cautious in their use of these systems in communicating with members and to have alternatives in place. Members should also be discouraged from using these systems for discussing union business or for personal communication.

The power of the personal touch...

Sometimes nothing works better than a one-on-one conversation. Whether your goal is to provide information, answer questions or persuade someone to get involved, making time to speak with someone in person shows a strong interest and commitment on your part.

Resources:

- North Carolina Cooperative Extension. *Creating Better Newsletters: Design Elements*. www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/it/it aids/online/cbn/lesson04. June 2006.
- OSSTF. *Workshop on Effective Communications*. Specialized Training 2003

Getting the word out

Districts/bargaining units require a well-established plan and strong networks to ensure good communication with members. This should involve a variety of different approaches, including:

• **Meetings:**

Regular district/bargaining unit and workplace meetings are essential to communicating with members. During times of crisis, special general meetings or a travelling "road show" may also be required.

• **Newsletter/President's report:**

Whatever you call it, the newsletter is an effective vehicle for reaching members, providing information and updates, and sharing issues of concern. You may wish to use both a short memo format to highlight key points as well as a longer newsletter which allows you to cover a wider range of topics in greater depth and offers space for commentary.

• **Email/website:**

This is the most immediate form of communication. Email distribution lists can be an excellent way of ensuring information gets out quickly. Websites must be clearly designed and updated regularly. When new information is posted on the website, an email "alert" will encourage members to visit.

• **Social Media:**

More and more members are linked in to social media and related applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs. For some, it is a primary method to communicate. Consider how you might use these approaches effectively to reach and engage members locally.

• **Telephone tree:**

This approach is most often used during sanctions or in a time of crisis. It is an effective way to reach members. Remember to prepare the message you want delivered and keep it clear and concise.