



Public Health Communications for Impact: Approaches for Strengthening Infrastructure

BY PHIG PARTNERS



SHAPING TOMORROW'S PUBLIC HEALTH TODAY.

Housekeeping



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Webinar is being
recorded.



Drop your questions
into the Q&A box.

Agenda

- A. Presentation: Public Health Communications Collaborative Action Guide
- B. Moderated panel: Improving communications infrastructure in the field
- C. Question and Answer session

Today's Presenter and Panel Moderator



Amanda Kwong, MPH
Director, Public Health
Communications Collaborative

Overcoming Challenges & Leveraging Strengths

An Action Guide for Communicators at Public Health Agencies

What to Expect

- Why the Action Guide?
- Methods
- Key findings
- How to use the Action Guide



Variation is real — but
so are **shared
dynamics.**

Understanding common
factors is the first step
toward **strengthening
public health
communications
departments.**



Research Questions

1. How are communications departments **structured and supported** across state and local public health agencies? How are functions that support dissemination and community connection connected?
2. What do communicators say **enhances or hinders effective communications**, and how do they work within real constraints?



Methods

- **Design:** 50 Qualitative, in-depth interviews
- **Participation:** Communication specialists in public health agencies (~1 hour each)
- **Sampling:** Selected agencies with respect to size, public health structure, region, political climate
- **Timing:** December 2025 - May 2025



Participants

Table 1B. Description of Participant Sample

CHARACTERISTICS		NUMBER
Positioning of Communication Team/Participant ⁷	Agency is only public health, so comms team serves all	25
	Agency is broader, but comms team serves only public health	21
	Agency is broader, and comms team serves the whole agency	4
Participant Position on Comms Team ⁸	Director of comms team	18
	Manager in comms team	9
	Solo comms staff	23
Number of Years Participant in Position	<1	9
	2-5	28
	6-10	9
	>10	4

¹ Apart from state agencies, health department size was defined using standards provided by the de Beaumont Foundation's PH WINNS Study. Departments were classified as: large local health departments (staff size > 25 and serving a population > 250,000), medium local health departments (staff size > 25 and serving a population of 25,000 to 250,000), and small local health departments (staff size < 25 or serving a population < 25,000).

² State public health governance structure is taken from the ASTHO Profiles project. See: <https://astho.shinyapps.io/profile/>

³ Region determined the U.S. Census. See: https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

⁴ Political leaning of state defined by considerations of popular vote in past presidential elections available at the time of sampling. See: <https://www.270towin.com/states/>

⁵ Rurality defined as percent of population living in rural areas. See: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>, 2020 numbers

⁶ Racial makeup of the state defined according to Census data available at the time of sampling. See: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/california-population-change-between-census-decade.html>; 2020 estimates.

Common Factors that Impact Communications Effectiveness

- 1. Political Environment
- 2. Morale
- 3. Organizational Position



CHALLENGE

FACTOR

STRENGTH

Less Aligned with Public Health

Political Environment

The external political landscape your agency is facing, including the degree to which the partisan and cultural views of elected officials or your community are aligned with your agency's goals and approaches

More Aligned with Public Health

- 11. Relationships Among Comms Staff
- 12. Relationships with the Media
- 13. Strategic Authority
- 14. Technological Sophistication



Three Things to Keep in Mind



Interrelationships



Varying control



Varying impact

Turning Understanding into Action

Chapter 2: Morale

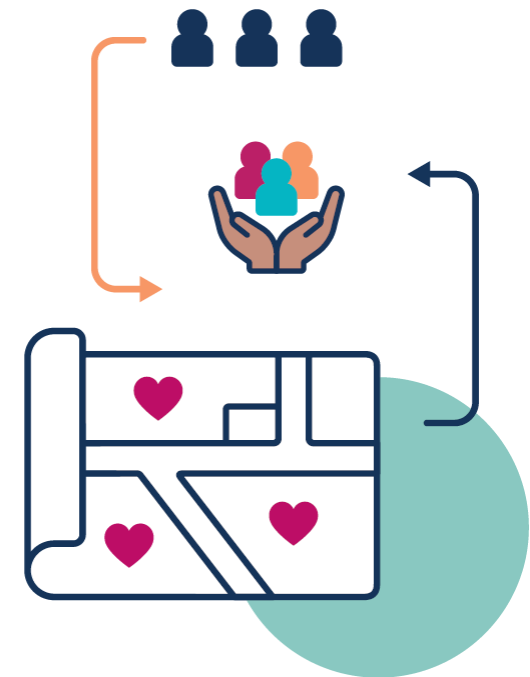
I. HOW MORALE IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does high morale impact communications?

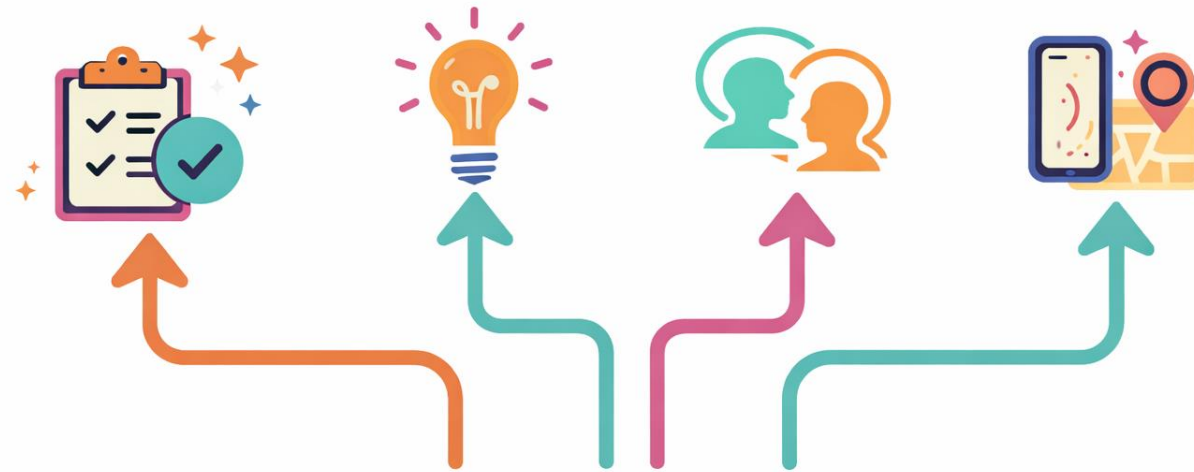
How does low morale impact communications?



II. HOW TO IMPROVE MORALE



How to Use the Action Guide



Choose your own adventure

Contents

Chapter 2: Morale

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II. HOW TO IMPROVE MORALE OR WORK AROUND LOW MORALE

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Chapter 2 Worksheet

STEP 1

Assessing Morale

SECTION THREE

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Deep Dive: Strategic Authority

Chapter 13: Strategic Authority

I. HOW STRATEGIC AUTHORITY IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does greater strategic authority impact communications?

Communicators described strategic authority as the ability to develop communications from a strategic perspective, rather than from a reflexive one. Communicators with strategic authority can develop communications materials as part of an overarching plan that accounts for key audiences, utilizes tailored messaging, incorporates trusted messengers, and leverages multiple materials and platforms. Communicators emphasized that having more strategic authority is not a reflection of the comms staff's talents and abilities, but is instead a function of the policies and culture within their agency.

When communicators have strategic authority, they can create effective communications for individual programs and develop a cohesive, organization-wide approach. Building the broader, organization-wide brand ensures programs' materials and messaging have a cohesive look and feel, which better positions the agency to communicate effectively.

"I feel like we made a big push in the last two or three years to really be on that strategic end of things...[W]e have to be very conscious about when we are putting communications out and what that communication looks like, how we're putting it out, how we're going to reach the folks that we need it to reach, and is it serving our purpose, our mission, our values — all of that." —C45



"So right now, we are building out a suite of key messaging. And the real goal there is so that everyone is speaking with the same voice. So, if you're in the field and are talking about long COVID, you're using the same key messages as the press office is with the media...[We] try to really centralize our messaging and ensure there's agency consistency on how we talk about issues." —C32



What is Strategic Authority?

Strategic Authority: The degree to which your communications team/department has the ability to develop communications from a **strategic perspective**, rather than a reflexive one. Communications are **part of an overarching plan** with **intentional decisions** about audience, messages, messengers, timing, and platforms.



When Strategic Authority is Strong



Communications
as part of a
broader strategy



Cohesive, agency-
wide messaging



Consistent brand,
look, and voice

*“So right now, we are building out a suite of key messaging. And the real goal there is so that **everyone is speaking with the same voice**. So, if you're in the field and are talking about long COVID, you're **using the same key messages** as the press office is with the media...[We] try to really centralize our messaging and ensure there's agency **consistency** on how we talk about issues.” –C32*

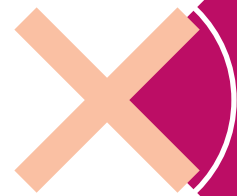
When Strategic Authority is Limited



Brought in late



Produce one-off materials



Expected to “just get something out”

*“I think comms, for a lot of people...is an **afterthought**. They say, ‘Okay, we’re going to create this great program. Yay!’ And then we get to **two days** before they’re going to launch it, and [they] say, ‘Oh, how are people going to know about it? I **guess we should bring in comms.**’” –C9*

How to Increase Strategic Authority



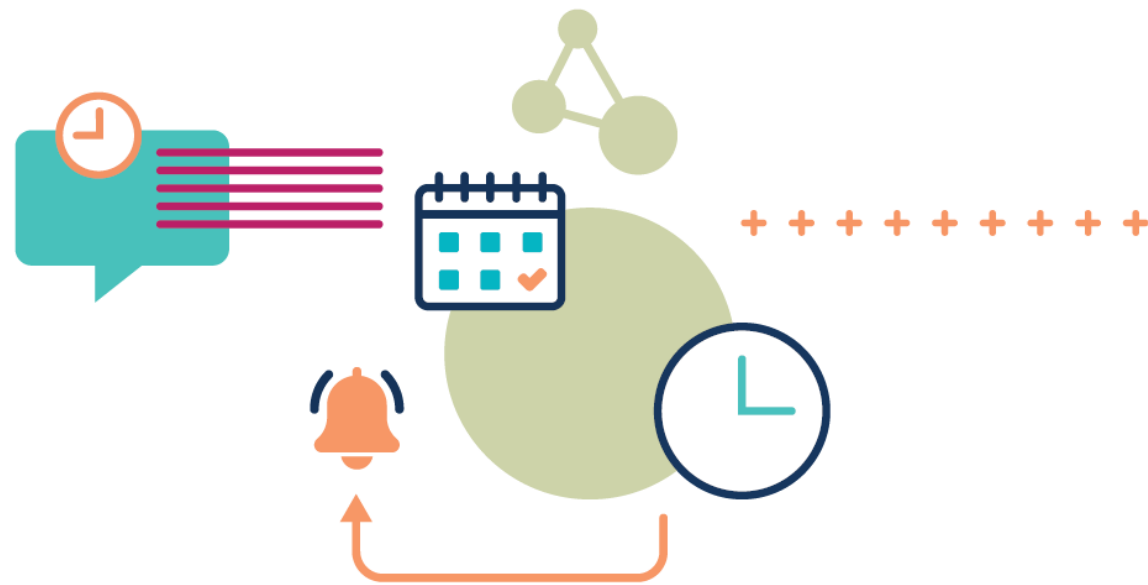
Encourage programs to bring comms in early



Develop a strategic plan



Create a communications calendar



How to Increase Strategic Authority



Develop clear procedures for comms requests



Ensure you have strong relationships with program staff



Get support from leadership

“[The director is] able to be an advocate for me... If she's in a meeting that I'm not in or in a community group that I'm not in, and she hears a communications opportunity, she will tell that staff... ‘Hey, make sure that you've connected with [the comms team] about that.’... To have her as a champion and an advocate, I think has been priceless, honestly.” –C35

Key Takeaways



Built from the lived experience of public health communicators across the country.



Designed to be practical, flexible, and usable in real-world conditions. Choose your own adventure!



Download the Action Guide & use the interactive worksheets to create your Action Plan.



Effective public health practice begins with effective communication. Improvement is possible!

Thank You!

More Resources

www.publichealthcollaborative.org

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info@publichealthcollaborative.org

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Panel Session

Today's Panelists



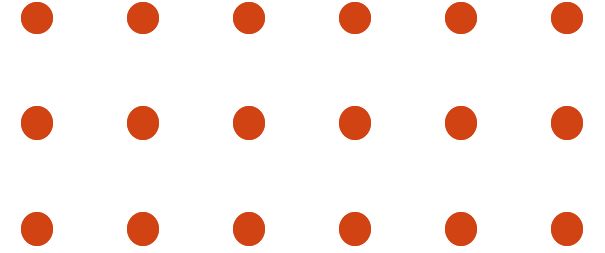
Maura Fitzgerald, MPA, MSOL
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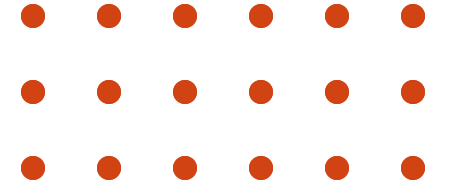


Luisa Hansen, MPH
Public Information Officer
UT Dept of Health & Human Svcs



Q & A Session





Closing and Evaluation

Thank you for joining us today!

<https://bit.ly/4uQy4AB>

