TIPS FOR SETTING GOOD OBJECTIVES

Objective: What are you trying to do?

A well-defined program objective is THE MOST important component of a good communication plan. If the objective is too broad, the decisions made from this point on will be vague, virtually guaranteeing an ineffective effort. Your objective is not your mission. Your objective is the next step in your overall plan for achieving your mission. Generally, as a school district Chief Financial Officer, your objectives will fall into one of two categories: behavior change or policy.

“Boosting teacher support for Common Core” and “ensure kindergarten readiness” are admirable and important endeavors, but they are too broad. Many things will have to happen to make these visions a reality. If you start with too broad an objective, you’ll end up with an overly broad audience and vague messages. You need to hone into an objective that is **DOABLE and MEASURABLE over the next 12-24 months.** For instance:

- **Behavior Change Objective**
  - Too Broad Example: “Boost teacher support for Common Core.”
  - Better Example: “Increase teachers’ participation in Common Core training sessions by 15%.”

- **Policy Change Objective**
  - Too Broad Example: “Ensure all children are ready for kindergarten.”
  - Better Example: “Provide access to Pre-K for 50% of district children by fall of 2015.”

For the purpose of this exercise, we ask that you consider an objective that ties to your 2015-16 budget development, focusing on one of the following themes:

- Tackling legacy costs
- Investing in Common Core
- Right-sizing the district to enrollment (can be for gaining or losing enrollment)
- Transformational expectations/goals require transformational (not incremental) changes
- Other: Choose something else that is top-of-mind

**Evaluating the Objective**

Write down your objective:

Is it a good objective? Use the following checklist to evaluate:

- Is the objective doable and achievable in the next 12-24 months? ☐ ☐
- Is there a clear audience target that makes this objective achievable? ☐ ☐
- Are there specific ways to measure your progress to let you know you’re headed in the right direction? ☐ ☐

The answer to all these questions should be “Yes.” If not, go back and refine your objective.
Creating Effective Messages

Setting a strong objective is the first step in developing smart communications. Effective messaging is about narrowing the focus and making a few strong points that people will remember – rather than throwing out a variety of points and letting the audience decide which of these it wants to retain. Before you can decide what you want to say in these points, however, you need to answer a couple of questions.

**Question One: Who are you trying to reach with your message? Who has the power to say yes or no?**

It is critical to identify the decision-maker you are ultimately trying to reach. This decision will help you select and prioritize your audience targets. The ultimate decision maker is the person who has the power to say yes or no to your objective. If your objective is to change behavior, the decision makers may be a specific group of people. If your objective is to change district policy, your decision maker may be your elected school board or your superintendent.

Regardless of whether your decision maker is an individual or a group, the audience for your message should be as narrowly targeted as possible. Your audience should never be the general public – it is simply too big and diverse to reach everyone with a single message. Instead, you should select a very specific target that relates to your objective.

_Example:_ A community health nonprofit is trying to reduce childhood obesity by increasing the number of children who walk to school in the community. Potential audiences for its messages could include moms, principals, or physical education teachers. The audiences could be narrowed even further by selecting moms of students at three elementary schools, for example. The more narrow you are with your audience choices, the more your message will resonate with those audiences.

**Question Two: What does your audience care about?**

Messages that take into account the values and core concerns of the target audience are most effective. By tapping into your audience's existing values, you can create common ground and more easily motivate them to act. These can be “big” values like fairness but they can also be “smaller” core concerns of a mother or father wanting to keep their family safe or a business owner wanting to make a profit.

Before you begin developing message points, take the time to think carefully about what your audience cares about. Be honest with yourself – the values of your audience may be different than your own values.

Brainstorm a list of audience values, and then select the one that seems to be most important to your audience. You can review public opinion studies or even informally talk to members of your target audience for insights. The important thing to keep in mind here is that you want to be sure that your message taps into one existing value that your audience has – not the value that you want them to have.

_Example:_ An environmental group wanted to stop a proposed airport expansion because the construction of new runways would destroy the habitat of a certain species of frog. To do this, the group needed to activate members of the community to tell local government officials to stop the expansion. The group talked with members of the community about their concerns. They found out that community members were very worried about increased traffic, but far less concerned about environmental impact. The group decided to focus their messages on how the airport expansion would increase traffic (their audience’s core concern), rather than its impact on biodiversity (the environmental group’s core concern), so that they’d have the best chance of getting the audience to act to stop the expansion.
Decision Makers and Audiences Worksheet

For this exercise, we ask that you choose among the following audiences for your messaging. Look back at the objective you identified above and select an audience or decision-maker you’ll need to reach to achieve it:

- Superintendent/district leadership team
- Central office department heads
- School principals
- Teachers
- Board
- Parents/community
- Outside funders

Who is the decision maker for your objective? (Remember to keep your audience as narrow as possible. And only select one audience at a time – different audiences will need different message boxes.)