

Briefing summary

- **Who:** For people involved in health care improvement projects who need to influence different audiences using clear messages about their work.
- **Why:** A Health Foundation review¹ of the empirical evidence into how to spread improvement ideas demonstrates the importance of targeting messages differently for different audiences.
- **What:** The briefing includes practical tips for developing messages with impact.

Why is it important to create clear, targeted messages in improvement work?

“It’s challenging, but essential to translate the team’s enthusiasm into a message that is relevant to all the groups of people you need to influence. It’s natural for clinicians – who are passionate and driven enough to win an improvement grant – to forget that the value of the work isn’t immediately apparent to others. When reaching out to engage colleagues, we have to ask ourselves ‘How will this help them and their patients?’”

Dr Carol Peden, Health Foundation Quality Improvement Fellow

Research into the spread of improvement ideas has demonstrated the importance of adapting messages to meet the needs of different audiences – responding to their varying interests, motivations and challenges.

Key messages are the messages that you want your audiences to remember and respond to above all else. They should be concise and clear statements that provide a focus for the content of your communications.

How to develop clear, targeted messages

As you plan your communications, you will need to identify which **audiences** you must engage to achieve your goals. Once you have done that, the next step is to identify the messages that are most likely to influence each audience group.

The research shows these messages will have more impact with your audiences if they:

- summarise the benefits of the work and the implications for their practice/role (what’s in it for them and what do you want them to do differently)
- reference evidence or data for the benefits in an accessible way, but are also transparent about any harms or costs
- address the priorities of your audiences, which for frontline staff often include improving patient experience and reducing workload
- are communicated multiple times through different channels, as long as people do not start to feel bombarded.

¹De Silva D. *Spreading improvement ideas: Tips from empirical research*. The Health Foundation, 2014.

Top tips for message development

As you develop your messages, bear in mind the following practical tips:

- The more you understand your audience's needs and their interests and attitudes to your work, the more powerful your messages will be. Use observation, dialogue, focus groups or surveys to understand their perceptions of the issue. It can also help to involve representatives of the audience you are targeting in both developing your messages and testing them.
- Invest time in researching and gathering the evidence, data and examples that support and validate your messages. This may be evidence about clinical outcomes, data on costs and efficiency benefits, or real stories involving patients and staff.
- It is important to keep messages simple for busy people.

Then as you communicate your messages, consider doing the following:

- Ensure your audiences hear the message from the people they trust. Involve spokespeople they respect or people they can relate to such as direct peers.
- Share a concise [message framework](#) with everyone involved in the project so that your communications are consistent across the team.
- Revisit and refresh your messages over time and keep them up to date.

An example of how to adapt messages

A hospital team running a telemedicine project that offers more flexible and better coordinated care for older people needs to encourage referrals, build political support and secure future funding.

They identify a message about the purpose of the work that is relevant for all their audiences, but beyond that their messages are adapted to reflect the priorities of specific audience groups:

- **For GPs:** Refer your patients to this new service to ensure their care is more effectively coordinated. Dr Smith, a GP who helped lead our pilot, said: "In our practice, we saw the following benefits..."
- **For local politicians:** Patients and their carers are telling us that this new service has transformed their care. Our patient survey showed 95% would recommend telemedicine support to others. Help us win further support for this work, which could benefit X,000 people in your constituency.
- **For commissioners:** Our pilot has shown an X% reduction in emergency hospital admissions, improved patient experience and cost savings of £Y. By funding this work, it will also contribute to your goal of 'bringing care closer to home'.

What others say

“When each stakeholder can positively answer the ‘What’s in it for me?’ question for themselves, the change has won hearts and minds.”

Improvement leader’s guide, Modernisation Agency

Resources

Spreading improvement ideas: Tips from empirical research, The Health Foundation, 2014.

<http://www.health.org.uk/publication/spreading-improvement-ideas-tips-empirical-research>

Using communications approaches to spread improvement, The Health Foundation, 2014.

<http://www.health.org.uk/publication/using-communications-approaches-spread-improvement>

Improvement leaders’ guide to sustainability and spread, Modernisation Agency, 2002.

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/archive/archive2011/patientflow/downloads/2_3leadershipguide.pdf