

Tips and Tools for Communicating about Your Programs Recompetition Status

Andrea Molarius, Executive Director

Since Head Start and Early Head Start recompetition opportunities are posted on the ACF website, several audiences are likely to hear that their beloved Head Start or Early Head Start program may be in jeopardy of termination. Concerns about the impacts of recompetition such as the loss of employment, child care, home visiting, and other community services can all introduce long-term morale issues and reputational liabilities at a time when your program is most in need of support. Engaging with your staff and stakeholders well before the recompetition notice becomes the center of public discussion can lower the chance that your program will experience turnover, liabilities, and a damaged reputation.

Effective management of stakeholder and employee relations during a time of instability calls for early, clear, and consistent communications. To the degree possible, try to provide information that describes how your program is at risk and the nature of the changes that could occur. Make sure to offer solutions for how different stakeholders can participate in planning, implementing, and monitoring program activities so that you can successfully navigate the recompetition process. Even in the most grim situations look for positive aspects or outcomes that could occur due to recompetition such as improved program quality or the opportunity to work as a team to put your program's best foot forward.

A Step by Step Guide to Developing Your Communication Plan

Step 1 – Identify your Stakeholders

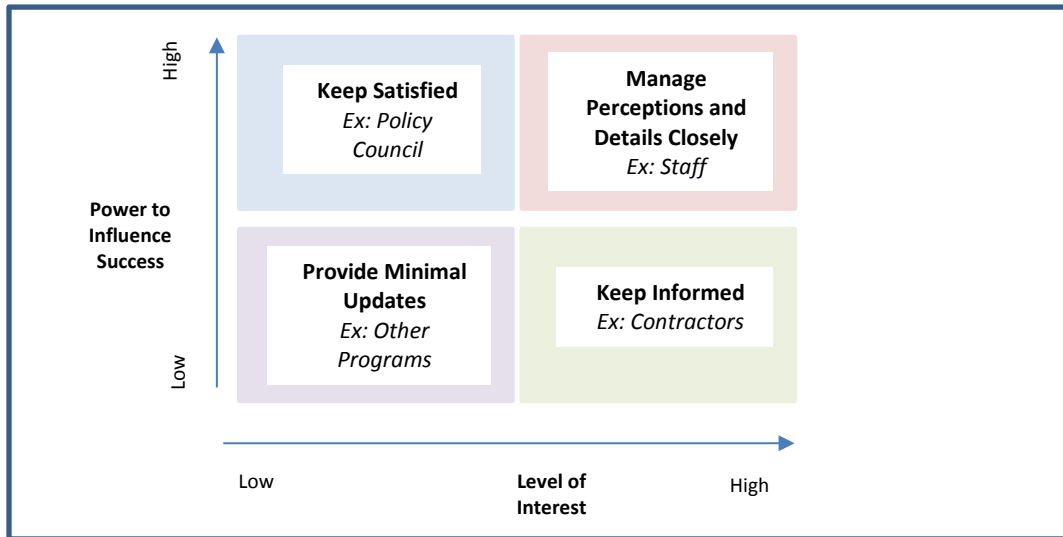
When developing a Communication Plan it is important to consider the different audiences that will need communication regarding the issue. These audiences include: parents, community partners, staff, Governing Board and Policy Council. First identify who you need to communicate with and why, then, take the time to analyze each target audience to shape your message. For example, your recompetition messaging should include at minimum two messages: one for the employees who could be directly affected and another for the community at large. Focus your message on one or two key points so that it does not become confusing. The table below shows some of the people who might be stakeholders in your program. You can also download a **Communications Plan** template by clicking on the links.

Key Stakeholders		
Staff	Parents	School Districts
Governing Board	Policy Council	Contracted Professionals

Step 2 – Prioritize your stakeholders

After completing your grid of key stakeholders, you may end up with a long list of people and organizations that are affected by your entry into recompetition. Some of these stakeholders may even have the power to support or impede your recompetition success. Map out your stakeholders on a **Stakeholder Support Grid** to identify the communication needs of each group. For example, your Governing Board is likely to have high power and influence over your success. They are also likely to

have a high level of interest in your success, these are the people you must fully engage and make the greatest attempt to satisfy their need for communication.



Step 3 – Understand your Key Stakeholders

In Step 3, you will drill down your communication objectives and clarify specific objectives for each audience. It is necessary to understand the perceptions of your stakeholders so that you can try to anticipate how they are likely to feel about and react to your recompetition notice. Document the communication needs in sufficient detail, including areas that hit on potentially sensitive issues such as job loss, school closures, etc. For example, if you are preparing a communication plan about your recompetite status, fully explore the impact it could have on your staff and the families in your program as part of your assessment. This information can be utilized to determine how best to engage different audiences and to communicate with each group. Some questions you may want to include are listed below. Key questions that can help you understand each group are also listed on our **Key Questions Worksheet**.

Sample Key Questions:

- What financial or emotional interest do they have in our program and program services?
- What motivates each group?
- What information will each group want from you?
- How should each group receive information? What are the best ways to communication your message to this group?
- If the perceptions of this group are likely to be negative how can you win them over to support your recompletion work?
- If you don't think you can win them over how can you manage their opposition?

A very good way of answering these questions is to talk to your stakeholders directly – people are often quite open about their views during difficult circumstances. Asking your staff for their opinion is often the first step in building a successful team effort. One method for categorizing stakeholder feedback is to note specific stakeholders that are likely to be advocates or those that will not support your efforts by using color coding in which you list advocates, supporters, and team members in different fonts. Use green font for supporters, use red font for those who may need extra information or persuasion to get on board, and note the responses of others who are neutral in blue text.

Step 4 – Create your Messaging & Communication Protocols

Messaging and protocols need to be developed to ensure that the core of your message is consistent, while addressing the specific questions that may arise from each audience. In Step 4 you will create pre-scripted messages and identify scenarios that would require communication with stakeholders. Also identify key personnel that will be involved in delivering these messages and allocate any necessary resources to ensure the message carriers are well informed.

Once you have clarified your communication goals and have a complete understanding of the different audiences you must communicate with, it's time to plan for delivery of the communications – that means working out the messages necessary and planning when and how these will be delivered. Before starting on the detail of your plan, jot down all the possible communications channels you could use. Think broadly and out of the box! You probably already use lots of effective ways to communicate in your organization. However, some new tools may help you get your message across. Here is a list to get you started:

Communication Methods			
Newsletter	Email	Training Announcements	Staff Meetings
Teleconferences	Board/PC Meetings	Staff Briefings	Program Improvement Launch Event
Webinar	Podcast	Lunchtime Meeting	Center Staff Meetings

Step 5 - Evaluate the effectiveness of your plan

In the final stage, deploy your key staff to talk to employees to get a general sense about whether your communication targets have heard and understood the key elements of your message. Listen to the feedback and fine tune your communication plan each month as you move towards the date your grant application is due.