Communication Strategy

Guidelines for Network Colleges

Guidelines for Creating an Effective Student Success Communication Strategy

Clear, effective, and timely communication is essential to the successful development of a student-focused culture. Whether your institution is beginning its Achieving the Dream (ATD) work or whether you have been part of the Network for a while, it is valuable communicate about your goals for joining the Network and how this will support your efforts to enhance the student experience. The experience of our colleges as well as our work leading learning initiatives has shown the importance of communicating about a large-scale change. While many project leads and Core Team Leaders are concerned about communicating before they have all the answers, most find that a lack of upfront communication leads to the cultivation of rumors that are often informed by fear of change and therefore worse than the reality of the change.

ATD's Communications Strategy Guidelines help Core Teams think through the most effective ways to communicate your student success work to various audiences. This document is intended to guide your discussions and prompt you to consider all variables as your team develops a communication strategy for your student success work.

Note: ATD institutions are not required to submit a communications strategy. However, we encourage you to work on it with your ATD Coaches.

Communications Team Structure

Developing and implementing an effective communication strategy is a highly collaborative effort that requires upfront planning, attention to detail, and a strong understanding of the needs, challenges, and desires of your various audiences. ATD colleges have often found that engaging representatives of all key stakeholders helps them develop a thoughtful plan filled with the detail necessary to deliver the right message at the right time to the right audience. However, having a large communications team can often bog down and confuse communication strategy development. We encourage you to think creatively about how to engage a wide range of stakeholders in contributing to the design and implementation of your communication strategy without the need for a large communications team.

Example Structure

One example structure to consider is assembling a small **core communications team** (no more than six individuals) that represents the key areas of your institution, including your ATD Core Team Leader. Together, these individuals should have in-depth knowledge of:

- The strengths and challenges presented by the institution's culture and structure.
- Your goals for ATD participation and your student success efforts.
- Communications strategy development and implementation.
- The experiences of stakeholders who work with students on the ground and will be most affected by your reforms, particularly faculty and student support staff.

To complement this core communications team—and to ensure your communications strategy is designed with the audience in mind—we encourage institutions to consider creating a communication, or

student success, advisory group. Think broadly about how your student success efforts will/could impact various stakeholder groups and consider tapping representatives from each to join your advisory group. Your scope of work for this group should include:

- Providing feedback on messaging and how this will resonate with the group they represent.
- Sharing insight into the channels and tools to use for communicating your message most effectively to each audience.
- Reporting back the overall reaction from their group and highlighting any challenges or questions left unanswered.

The advisory group can play these roles as a group that meets together or independently, depending on your needs and culture. We also encourage you to consider how you can work with your ATD Coaching team to leverage their experience in communicating large reforms with varied audiences.

Steps to Developing a Strong Communication Strategy

Step 1: Finalize your Core Message

Depending on where you are in your ATD journey, there are two different approaches you can take in this step.

First ATD Year

Before you have developed your ATD Action Plan at the end of your first year in ATD, your communication efforts will likely be focused on introducing ATD to your campus community. To do this, we encourage you to develop an **opportunity statement** that explains:

- Your institutional need for the supports offered by ATD participation and the urgency of fulfilling this need. Include any institutional or environmental factors that contribute to the urgency of this need.
- Your goal(s) for your work with ATD.
- What the institution will need to do to achieve these goals and take full advantage of this opportunity.
- The benefits of pursuing this opportunity to various stakeholders, particularly your students.

Your opportunity statement should be succinct and clear without using jargon. It should be positive and inspirational in tone and convey a sense of community and camaraderie. Finally, ensure it is aligned with your institution's existing overarching strategy and vision and the link to enhancing the student experience of your college is clear.

As you begin communicating your opportunity statement, it will be important to provide resources for your audience to learn more about ATD without cluttering the core message. We have provided resources for this purpose on ATD Connect and encourage you to use your ATD Coaching team and ATD staff as a resource if you get questions you are unable to answer.

ATD Year Two Onward

A strong vision can be identified as a clear, specific, and inspiring understanding of what the institution aspires to become or achieve and can be used by all stakeholders to set priorities and guide actions. The vision is a concise and forward-looking statement that engages and motivates the college community to action and clearly articulates the benefits for student success.

As you design or refine your student success vision, consider the following:

- Clearly align your vision with the institution's strategic direction.
- Connect your vision to the student experience.
- Demonstrate how your identified ATD priority areas complement and integrate with the other student success efforts taking place at your institution.
- Ensure all team members are able to comfortably explain your vision.
- Ensure your vision provides a clear guide to faculty, advisors and related staff, and students.
- Your vision should make it clear that supporting students is the collective responsibility of everyone involved in the student success reforms so there is not one single institutional owner and the changes are not being forced onto stakeholders.

Step 2: Analyze Stakeholders and Barriers

Conduct an analysis of your ATD goals and plans with a focus on stakeholders and barriers. Who are the key stakeholders that need to feel a sense of urgency for your ATD engagement to be successful? What barriers or other issues may be keeping stakeholders from having the urgency you need for your ATD efforts to be successful? How can you leverage key stakeholders to generate excitement and buy-in? What role can communication play in overcoming barriers?

Step 3: Agree on the Purpose and Goals of your Communications Strategy

Identify the overarching purpose of your communication efforts. Your communications strategy should be focused on driving attitudinal change as it relates to your ATD work as well as integration with your institution's other student success efforts and goals. Communication of your efforts is not an end in and of itself but is a means to achieving transformative change.

Once you have identified your purpose, identify the specific and measurable goal(s) your communication efforts are working toward.

Tips:

- For both the purpose and goals, consider conducting a visioning exercise with your team. Ask each member to identify the accomplishments they hope your ATD engagement has achieved within the first year of implementation, particularly as it relates to the attitudinal change component of your work.
- Be sure to align your communications goals with your ATD and college goals.

If you identify more than one goal, complete steps 4-10 with a separate template for each goal.

Step 4: Identify your Key Audiences (Internal and External)

Identify and profile specific audiences you are targeting with your communication efforts. This is essential as you choose the most effective ways to communicate with each audience. Profile information could include: audience's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to your ATD engagement; ob

obstacles to this audience fully supporting or participating in reaching your goals; and characteristics of this audience.

Tips:

- Identify individuals from each audience groups to test your method and message.
- Consider mapping your audiences by their influence on achieving your goals and their proximity to the reforms (i.e. how much their day-to-day will be impacted by the changes). Putting your audiences into categories based on these criteria will help you prioritize your efforts and to identify the right frequency and complexity of communication for each group.
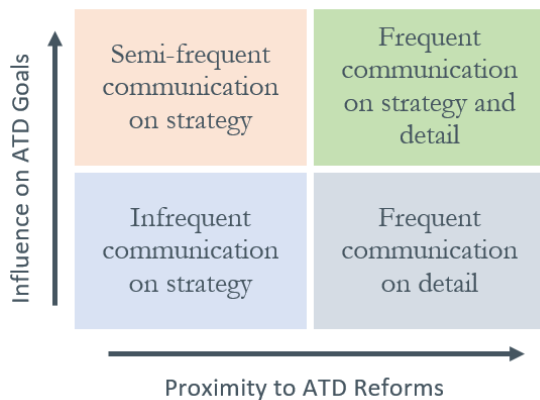
Step 5: Develop Key Messages

What do your audiences need to know about your ATD engagement to generate buy-in? For each audience, identify what matters most to them in their role, the biggest obstacles to achieving this, and how your ATD efforts can get them closer to their ideal. Whether access to more tailored and timely student information, a more fulfilling role in supporting students, or a reduced workload, your communication plan should be detailed and informed by evidence about these goals and challenges. Messages should be concise and engaging.

Tips:

- Make sure your communication strategy answers the questions: Why? Why now? Why we will succeed.
- As you develop your messages, consider how to address different groups. What early wins you could pursue to build urgency and buy-in for your ATD efforts with each audience? For example, have your president highlight the importance of the work in all upcoming communications.

Step 6: Identify Communications Channels

Identify the communication medium(s) that will effectively reach your targeted audience(s), such as Twitter, Facebook, website, email, newsletter, meeting, speech, intranet, video, or printed materials.

Tip:

- Begin by identifying the communication channels open to you then map these to your audiences and messages.

Step 7: Identify Evaluation Metrics

Evaluation of your communication strategy is essential to ensuring your efforts and resources are being used effectively. Evaluation should be an ongoing activity rather than a summative activity to enable you to make mid-course corrections and achieve maximum impact. Targets and milestones should be developed for each measure.

Tips:

- Develop SMART evaluation metrics (specific, measurable, actionable, relevant, timely).
- Conduct a pre-communication strategy assessment for each metric to make sure you can most accurately track your success.

Step 8: Develop a Work Plan

A work plan is a detailed timeline of the activities you will undertake as part of your communication plan. It identifies the:

- Resources, including partnerships, staff, students, and money, you will need to complete your communication activity.
- Lead person for all things related to a specific communication activity/event/product, as well as other key people involved in completing the communication work.
- Activities that can best help you convey your message to the intended audience in a memorable way.
- Timeline for each activity.
- Budget implications of each activity.

Tips:

- This is an ideal time to think about other initiatives on campus or in your community that you can use as partners to help you achieve your goal. Partners can provide funds, expertise, support, or other resources that you may need.
- For important messages, consider using multiple and unconventional mediums and activities. For example, have your students communicate the benefits to them to faculty and advisors through a short play!
- Each communication activity should be focused on achieving your identified goals rather than communication for its own sake.

Step 9: Evaluate and Adjust as Necessary

Agree on times to evaluate the progress in implementing your communication strategy and determine strengths and weaknesses; identify obstacles; and create and implement new approaches so that your plan will be successful in supporting your identified goal.

Tip:

- Don't forget to consider how you can leverage your communication successes to generate even more excitement about the work!

Communications Strategy and Work Plan

Communication Strategy Sample

Your communication strategy should be no more than a page long and should clearly demonstrate the link between the various components. The purpose of this document is to guide the actions and decisions of your communication work and to help explain your activities to team members and others who are invested in the success of your ATD reforms. Below is an example template you may use as you develop your communication strategy.

Insert your Student Success Vision or ATD Opportunity Statement here.						
Purpose: Insert the overarching purpose or objective your internal or external communication efforts are supporting.						
Communication Goal	**Related ATD Goal(s)**	**Audience(s)**	**Communication Category**	**Communication Message**	**Communication Medium(s)**	**Evaluation Metric(s)**

Communication Work Plan Sample

There are many tools for organizing the time, money, and staff you need to implement a communication plan. Below is an example that you may use to organize your communication work plan.

Purpose: Insert the overarching purpose or objective your internal or external communication efforts are supporting.									
Goal(s): Insert the specific goal that you wish to accomplish through your communication plan. As you have additional goals, create separate templates and think through the same issues.									
Communication Activity / Event / Product	**Status**	**Description, Including Key Messages**	**Audience(s)**	**Communication Medium**	**Lead Person and Other Key People**	**Date(s) for Completion**	**Resources**	**Evaluation Metric(s)**	**Related Communication Goal**