Unlocking Potential

Strategies for Building a Strong Communications Culture within Your SEA

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The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Bureau of Indian Education, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

Unlocking Potential:

Strategies for Building a Strong Communications Culture within Your SEA

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Overview

State education chiefs are better able to execute on their visions and deliver on improved outcomes for all children when they can fully unlock the potential of the team within their state education agency (SEA). SEA staffers are some of the most important stakeholders involved in the work of delivering on a state chief's vision, mission, and goals.

Staffers interact with practitioners in schools and districts on a near-daily basis; they collaborate with external stakeholders at the local, state, and national levels; and they ultimately do the work necessary to achieve the agency's strategic goals. Without a strong internal communications culture, agencies often default to ad-hoc internal communications for staff, which can lead to confusing or infrequent updates, lack of clarity on direction, and inconsistent information across the organization. A strong culture built on internal communications and engagement is crucial to ensure that internal stakeholders fully understand the agency's vision and mission, recognize how they can be actively engaged in its implementation, and see how their work plays a clear role in delivering on both the mission and vision to improve outcomes for all children.

The Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) approach to leadership development and organizational capacity is grounded in the Leadership Playbook for Chief State School Officers. According to this resource, unlocking the potential of the SEA means creating a strong internal culture at the state agency in which employees are moving toward increased levels of ethical and values-driven behavior from top to bottom and from bottom to top. This reduces organizational risk and brings a continuity of purpose to all staff members. An SEA with shared leadership empowers staff members to direct themselves and make strategic decisions to advance their work while increasing the SEA's overall capacity.

Building a strong culture of internal communications and engagement means providing employees with regular, meaningful communications and two-way engagement opportunities agency-wide. This helps employees and senior leaders build trust with one another and keeps everyone on the team informed, engaged, and empowered in executing on the agency's vision, mission, and goals.

The following framework is aligned with CCSSO's Leadership Playbook and is designed as a complementary resource to help state chiefs and their teams achieve these goals and either create a new internal communications culture or strengthen their existing one.

The framework is organized around a cycle of **four key principles** for the development and continuous improvement of internal communications and engagement, based on best practice research, interviews with communications experts, and input from current and former SEA leaders and communicators.

The principles are:

DISCOVER the communications needs of your staff through continuous, active listening.

DESIGN and build a culture of communications through clear, deliberate leadership at all levels.

DELIVER clear and effective communications and engagement routines and processes that inform, seek input, and include staff voices at all levels in decision-making.

STRENGTHEN systems by listening and responding to stakeholder feedback, analyzing data, and continually improving.

This framework includes guidance and case studies illustrating how to start and sustain an ongoing, agency-wide system of internal communications and engagement. In addition, this resource includes a section on crisis communications and recommendations for communicating internally during an unexpected crisis situation *(see Appendix IV).* The framework is designed for use by individuals across the SEA and can be applied in different ways:

- **For state chiefs,** strong internal communications systems can provide the upward feedback necessary to stay connected to your team's needs. A strong leadership cabinet helps, but without a way to stay directly tied to the rest of the organization, agency leaders can miss internal issues or concerns. This guide can be used to help establish a strong internal communications and engagement culture that can be used to build trust, keep your team informed, and make decisions.

- **For state communications teams,** strong internal communications and engagement provides ongoing visibility into the workings of the SEA and the ability to strategically plan for and/or rapidly respond to questions, concerns, and urgent needs. When internal communications are strong, SEA staffers can learn to act as communicators and effectively share information across units to help solve problems. This resource includes best practices from states with successful internal communications and engagement systems and provides guidance on how to align internal communications and engagement efforts with the SEA's larger goals and vision.

- **For other SEA employees,** strong communications systems and structures help staff stay informed, share information, collaborate, and solve problems. Strong internal systems provide access to information, create opportunities to contribute to discussions about issues across units, and help to develop and update solutions. This guide can be used to set expectations for an agency's internal communications and engagement systems. It suggests how internal communications principles can help internal teams function more effectively.

Internal Communications: Why It Matters

The traditional SEA structure, like most state agencies, is a bureaucracy. A chief sits at the top, supported by deputies, a leadership team, and a staff of often more than 100 people spread across multiple units. These are the people who do the daily work of fulfilling the agency's mission by equitably managing resources and creating, implementing, and monitoring state and federal education policy.

Each unit or office within the agency works to solve critical issues, such as the needs of homeless students or those with special needs. However, these offices frequently work independently to achieve their own goals instead of working together toward the overall goals and mission of the organization. These "silos" can complicate intra-agency communication and lead to confusing or disparate messages sent to external audiences.

When used in sequence, the four principles outlined in this framework—Discover, Design, Deliver, and Strengthen—can create a strong internal communications culture that is cohesive and concise and effectively keeps your staff informed so they are well prepared to meet the needs of your constituents.

Questions to Consider

- Who in your SEA should be involved in internal communications efforts?
- What about your current internal communications and engagement efforts works well? What gaps need to be addressed?
- Does your current system allow everyone in your agency to get information, ask questions, and remain engaged?
- What lessons can you draw from recent communications-intensive efforts, such as No Child Left Behind waivers, Every Student Succeeds Act plan development, and state-level policy implementations?

Using internal communications strategies and structures to keep staff informed and involved and bringing together the right people to form problem-solving teams are the keys to success, said James Liebman, the founder and director of the Columbia University Center for Public Research and Leadership and an expert in institutional design and change in public education. "People have the expertise to solve problems but tend to stay in their lane," he said. "If you can get folks together, you can get expertise and information that is 'hidden' in a bureaucracy."

The true value of strong internal communications is that increased information facilitates increased involvement from your staff, he argued. “Problems today are complex and cut across different areas,” Liebman added. “To solve them, you need to involve people from different divisions. You end up unlocking a ton of expertise.”

A common complaint among SEAs is that they are divided into silos and that information rarely—if ever—flows down from the top or across from unit to unit. This, Liebman said, is a fixable problem. Internal communications is key to unleashing the problem-solving capabilities of your siloed departments on the complex issues that aren’t influenced by organizational charts, responsibility matrices, and other organizational tools. Instead of getting mired in the “bureaucratic underbrush,” Liebman said, “think about this in terms of teams and their capacity to get things done in cross-functional groups. Tell them that we need this problem solved. Success is a solution; failure is saying this won’t work.”

Create Problem-Solving Teams

Liebman recommends identifying a problem that has an agency-wide impact and creating a cross-unit team to work together to solve it. By collaborating on a solution for the first problem, he said, the team can demonstrate the power of working across units and create a model that can be easily replicated for other issues.

Effectively sharing information is also valuable in itself, creating a culture of trust across the entire team. SEA leaders and staff typically have a limited number of communications tools and multiple stakeholders to communicate with and engage. There will always be a lot to say, and external communications will most often take priority over internal communications. That said, with sufficient staffing and the right tools and processes in place, a structure can be built and sustained that ensures all staff feel connected to the agency’s mission and vision and are never left to read about new initiatives or policies in the next day’s paper.

Katie Bieber, director of communications at the Nebraska Department of Education, puts it plainly: “Your internal staff are your first line of defense,” she said. “They have to know the message first. It is so crucial and the easiest thing to forget. You assume people know the message, but they may not.”

Preparing for the Unexpected

This resource focuses primarily on setting up strong day-to-day internal communications and engagement systems, but **SEAs must also be prepared for unexpected challenges that arise—because they will**.

Some of these unexpected challenges are simply a by-product of our fast-paced world: Changes in another state agency may necessitate a response from the SEA. The state economy could see a market downturn that has consequences for funding. A legislator may file a bill that upends months of work. A member of the state board or a key internal staff person may step down suddenly due to professional misconduct. A natural disaster in a neighboring state may result in a large new population of students to serve immediately.

These issues often require crisis communications. Each incident will require a different response, but the steps taken internally to relay good information before misinformation can spread should be largely the same.

Resources and concrete recommendations to help you plan for and respond to unexpected situations are in **Appendix IV**. The four internal communications principles discussed in this playbook—Discover, Design, Deliver, and Strengthen—can help guide your planning and strategy.

Internal Communications Principles

Used in conjunction with CCSSO's [Leadership Playbook](), the principles outlined below can inform the internal behaviors and actions needed to improve communications outcomes—and by extension program outcomes—agency-wide.

The CCSSO Leadership Playbook relies heavily on the communications skills and capacities of individuals in SEA leadership roles working with the communications systems available to them. Whether they are working to bring people together, craft and share a vision, or unlock potential across the SEA, the Leadership Playbook recommends that leaders communicate effectively with their internal stakeholders. In addition, to grow as a leader and more effectively steward a critical state agency, chiefs need systems for listening and gathering feedback from their staff.

The principles outlined in this internal communications framework can be used in conjunction with the Leadership Playbook to dig deeper into how leaders can more effectively communicate internally. For organizations able to develop an entirely new suite of internal communications tools, processes, and routines, the principles should be applied in order as part of a cycle of continuous improvement. SEAs that are stretched thin or simply need to improve an existing internal communications and engagement structure should take a tactical approach and apply these principles as needed.

Communicating through Transitions

New leaders transitioning into an SEA cannot put a new internal communications and engagement structure in place immediately. They must first go through the **Discover** phase and listen to feedback from staff about what's already working and where there are gaps to address. It's important to first establish and build trusting relationships with SEA staff and respect key elements of the current SEA communications and engagement culture. Assure staff that their perspectives and involvement will be used to inform adjustments and that changes will reflect what is best for the agency, not just the new leadership team. Approach change with sensitivity, and create a transparent plan that minimizes anxiety or discomfort through the transition. If you don't sufficiently anticipate and account for these factors, the transition will likely suffer from setbacks that can hinder growth and change that come from well-managed transitions.

Consider using a **change management lens** to inform communication through a leadership transition that builds, establishes, and maintains trust. The CCSSO Leadership Playbook and First 100 Days Guide have resources for leaders operating in these contexts.

Discover the communications needs of your staff through continuous, active listening.

The most critical principle for strengthening internal communications is *Discover*. A failure to investigate and listen to what is currently happening in your agency, or a failure to understand the current culture or needs and wants of your team, can cause leaders and colleagues to make critical errors that undermine your efforts to improve internal communications.

The Discover phase requires a solid understanding of the ways in which your SEA already communicates, with all of its strengths and shortcomings. Engaging in a process to discover what works and what doesn't in the current systems and structure can provide the necessary information to rethink and strengthen the current system, leading to better communication at all levels of the organization.

Putting principles into action

Develop an understanding of your current reality. Any changes in internal communications and engagement have to reflect what works and what isn't working in the existing structure. "One cannot just go about building a culture without first acknowledging the existing culture," said Matt Blomstedt, the commissioner of education in Nebraska. First, build an accurate picture of the status quo. This provides the baseline knowledge needed to prioritize and build out any necessary improvement strategies. Conducting a **communications audit** is the most common and comprehensive way to develop this baseline understanding. Strong communications audits have multiple components (*see the key elements of a communications audit in Appendix III*) that assess if the needs of your internal audiences are being met, if your efforts are working, and if your work is aligned with the agency's goals.

Listen to your staff to understand their needs. A comprehensive audit will provide the initial data to design your internal communications structure, but that's not enough. Create opportunities for staff members to participate in focus groups or unit meetings where they can provide additional input. Consider creating an advisory group of staff members from across the agency who can provide additional context on the input you receive and provide ongoing feedback.

Create and communicate a timeline for the internal communications plan with clear benchmarks and opportunities for staff to offer feedback. It is critical for staff to not just understand what is changing, but how it is changing, over what period of time, and how their feedback contributed. They should know what change to look for, what success will look like, and how they can participate. Share the timeline and then post it in an easily accessible, such as the agency's intranet, to provide ongoing transparency. Update the timeline regularly to indicate progress, and add new milestones as they are identified. This can lead to cycles of feedback in which all staff can provide quality information to improve the results.

A communications audit should address the following:

Internal capacity

- What communications systems do you have?
- How well do the current systems match internal stakeholders' preferences for receiving information?
- How frequently are you communicating?

Key audiences

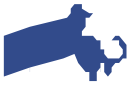
- How frequently do internal stakeholders want information communicated to them?
- Do internal stakeholders report that they feel informed?
- What outlets and feedback mechanisms do internal stakeholders have for sharing their own views?

Goals

- What are your communications goals?
- What data or stakeholder feedback are your goals based on?
- How recent is that data? How recently have you refreshed the goals?
- How are you measuring your ongoing efforts?

Discover: Examples from the field

Louisiana created a "Teacher Leader Advisors" workgroup to provide input on state initiatives. One major takeaway from an early meeting was that teacher leaders felt that internal SEA staff provided teachers with conflicting guidance on requirements. Upon discovering this, the SEA reorganized internally so that each LEA would have a single point of contact within the SEA and multiple teams would vet communications for coherence before sending the message to the LEA. This improvement in internal communications was the direct result of gaining a better understanding of how communication was received in the field.



Massachusetts conducted an internal survey in 2016 to gauge the need for refinements to their current engagement and communication efforts. Based on survey results, the SEA identified six areas for improvement and created an internal communications plan as part of its broader strategic communications efforts. Recognizing the value of engaging with the internal team, the SEA committed to six action areas to build staff awareness and understanding of the agency's strategic priorities, share content and knowledge between units, and build staff morale. The plan calls for: (1) creating space for regular announcements and an online community; (2) creating more opportunities for units to work together; (3) providing strategic updates to all staff; (4) creating searchable staff profiles; (5) creating more opportunities for the commissioner to interact with the staff; and (6) creating a workgroup to identify additional areas for improvement. All staff members have access to the details of the plan, which is available on the intranet.

Figure 1: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education internal communications plan summary

Design and build a culture of communications through clear, deliberate leadership at all levels.

Successful internal communications and engagement strategies rely on key practices that, when applied deliberately, create the routines and structures that form the core of an organization's communications culture. All staff members should understand SEA priorities, why they were chosen, key tactics, and how they connect to their work. One-way, top-down communication isn't good enough. A strong communications system promotes information flow in four directions: from the chief to the newest hire and back up again, and side to side across units. This approach should ensure that there are authentic opportunities for staff members to ask questions and offer feedback.

The goal of the *Discover* phase is to develop an accurate understanding of the current state of your organization's internal communications culture. The goal of the *Design* phase is to use that information to create refinements and new systems to strengthen and improve the current conditions. The staffing decisions you make and the routines you require in your design signal to the staff what you value in internal communications.

"Building a brand" for your organization for an external audience is common practice. But building a brand *internally* through a strong internal communications culture can be just as important. As Colin Mitchell wrote in the *Harvard Business Review,*[1] "When people care about and believe in the brand, they're motivated to work harder and their loyalty to the company increases." Your staff is frequently interacting with external stakeholders, whether school districts, educators, or even friends and family. If they know, understand, and are invested in the chief's vision and mission of the SEA, they are excited and empowered to not only clearly communicate it, but also effectively deliver on the work for all students.

Putting principles into action

Establish regular, predictable communications and engagement routines to share information and generate input. Use results from the communications audit to identify two to three different vehicles for regular communication with your internal staff. Consider both what your staff has identified as their preferred ways to receive information and what you have the capacity to do well. If you have a talented staff of writers, build written updates into your plan; if you have a video team and equipment, plan for regular video updates. Play to your strengths, but also build a system that will meet the needs of your staff. Use this as an opportunity to design a system that will allow you to build predictable routines, share the same message with everyone at once, and create authentic engagement opportunities. Consider instituting regular opportunities for staff to ask questions, provide input, and share their own thinking, such as brown bag lunches, all-staff meetings, or weekly open-door "office hours" with senior leadership. Defining "regular" and how often to communicate

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[1] Mitchell, Colin. (2002, January). Selling the Brand Inside. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2002/01/selling-the-brand-inside

with staff also will vary depending on your agency. Use the Discover phase to decide if communications should come daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, or some mixture in frequency.

Staff appropriately and be consistent. Internal communications should be viewed not as an occasional activity, but as an essential part of how you do business. Before you roll out your plan, be sure any routines are sustainable. Don't commit to more than you can do—a monthly newsletter is more reasonable than a weekly one; a weekly video is possible, but a daily one might be hard to maintain. If you start an effort aggressively and then trickle off, staff will lose confidence; if you start slowly and then build up, staff will be more likely to feel valued and connected to the agency's work. If you have limited staff capacity, consider how you might share responsibilities among multiple staff members, or ask for volunteers who might be interested in contributing to the work.

Create solid structures for internal communications. A regular meeting structure and schedule, consistent communications vehicles, and clear processes for employees to seek information and provide feedback are all part of solid internal communications structures. It is not enough to implement these strategies on an ad hoc basis. It should be clear to the entire SEA how they will receive internal information and when they will have the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback.

Design: Examples from the field

Arkansas, spurred by changing demands under ESSA and the state's strategic planning process, recognized the need to more closely align school accountability and school improvement support. In order to ensure that both offices were communicating effectively with one another and to better align improvement efforts with accountability and monitoring structures, the SEA chose to merge these offices. Because the new merged office will also be outward facing, a rebranding effort is planned.

California has developed a state theory of change that articulates its beliefs about how schools and students will achieve. Subsequently, the SEA organized cross-functional team structures focused on a cycle of inquiry model consistent with that theory of change. After two cycles of inquiry, California created new teams and initiated a series of knowledge-sharing roundtable discussions to build staff understanding.

Kentucky designs opportunities for staff to hear from leadership in multiple forums. One such opportunity is a 15- to 20-person brown bag lunch with the commissioner, conducted at regular intervals. The SEA also provides intentional, agenda-driven small group meetings where sensitive issues can be discussed. Finally, the leadership team has a twice-monthly planning meeting with the expectation that the planning meeting members—who are also key leaders—will discuss the meeting content with their own teams.

Nebraska's chief recognized the need to present a united identity of the SEA to external stakeholders and launched a rebranding effort, complete with a style guide, new logos, email templates, and additional collateral materials and templates. To ensure all staff would use the new logo and style guide, the SEA made a strong case about the value of a single brand and its ability to communicate a message of professionalism and consistency. Now, stakeholders receive messages from a single brand, in a single tone, and in one statewide voice.

Deliver clear and effective communications and engagement routines and processes that inform, seek input, and include the staff voices at all levels in decision-making.

To create a strong culture of communication, there must be structures that ensure that good communication is happening consistently. However, structures alone are not enough. Staff members should know how and when they will receive information and how and when they will have the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback. Also, they should feel confident they are being heard. The principles of follow-through should apply to staff at all levels. If these routines are consistent and predictable, the team will more clearly understand the information and the agency's culture, which will increase investment in the work.

These actions can and should go well beyond just information sharing. If you incorporate cross-functional teams in your SEA, you have to manage their use. Consistent delivery of messages and results builds greater buy-in, generates longer-term commitment, and leads to active and equitable internal communication and decision-making. Even ad hoc, issue-driven teams that operate outside the typical bureaucratic structure need to be well organized and have clearly established goals, resources, and deadlines. After the work of these ad hoc teams is complete, there should be a process to evaluate their success and determine how to implement any recommendations for next steps. This consistent delivery and follow-through will build support for these systems.

Putting principles into action

Model and reinforce the importance of internal communications and engagement. A strong internal communications culture starts at the top—if the chief and other senior leaders don't make internal communications a priority, neither will the rest of the team. Once you set up routines, use them. For example, if you have established a weekly agency newsletter, be sure the chief is reading it and using it to share important news with all staff. This conveys that this newsletter is meaningful. The same is true with all-staff meetings. The chief should lead the meeting to show these are important for everyone. Most important, be sure the chief and members of the leadership team are constantly considering the internal team when planning for any communications activity. Whether it's the rollout of a new human resources policy or an announcement about a major education initiative, asking simple questions like "How are we going to inform staff?" or "How are we going to involve staff?" at the start of the planning process will make a huge difference.

Know your audience. Communication should be consistent, predictable, and appropriate for an internal audience. Recognize that not everyone will read everything you send them—if a connection to their work isn't clear, or if it arrives in their inbox during the busiest time of day, or if they're just not interested in the topic, staff may not pay attention. Keep your messages clear and concise, and be deliberate in selecting work to highlight. Call attention to efforts and initiatives happening across the agency and at all levels, not just in certain units or divisions. Apply the same basic principles internally that you use for external communications: Provide relevant, concise, and engaging information.

Create a two-way conversation. As you communicate with your staff, find ways to entice them to respond. Add trivia questions, contests, or surveys to your weekly newsletter; invite staff from across the agency to submit articles or columns to be shared; place a suggestions box in break rooms; host a Twitter chat; invite staff to submit questions for a Q&A; or hold agency-wide open forums on the intranet. Find creative ways to engage your team in a back-and-forth conversation to make sure everyone feels comfortable and finds a way to be heard.

Distribute decision-making across teams to build cohesion and encourage collaboration. Many SEA initiatives involve multiple teams. By leveraging the expertise and perspectives of staff from across teams, you can increase effectiveness while building cohesion.

Deliver: Examples from the field

The **Illinois** Board of Education posts a newsletter on its website each week with updates on new initiatives, upcoming events, board activities, highlights including profiles of outstanding teachers, and a message from the state superintendent. Staff from across the agency provide content about their department or unit . Newsletters dating back to 2005 are posted online.

Massachusetts recognized that cross-agency collaboration was inhibited by the fact that staff didn't know about the work happening in other units, didn't recognize their peers in the elevator or halls, and had very few opportunities to meet each other in an informal way. To address this issue, the agency posted a searchable staff directory with headshots on the intranet. In addition, the agency is investing in technology to create an on-the-desktop system to broadcast messages, updates, and announcements. It also is developing an online community for staff to share lessons learned and connect with one another virtually.

Nebraska's state chief attended each of the internal meetings to plan and launch the state's implementation of its new school accountability system. After the meetings, all meeting minutes and data used to develop rankings for schools were shared with staff to model transparency and build trust. Throughout the project, no school data leaked outside of the agency. Trust had been built—both in the process and among the SEA staff.

Nebraska has invested in internal communications and has developed systems that match staff strengths to communication needs. The SEA regularly sends all staff members a newsletter and video messages from the state's chief. The staff receive a daily email that has five news stories that are pertinent to the organization. Some stories are about education in general; others are about districts in the state. Additionally, the public information officer and multimedia specialist, who both have experience in broadcast journalism, create three- to five-minute videos in the style of a local television news report to further contextualize information.

New Mexico holds monthly all-staff meetings to discuss current priorities, answer questions, and highlight specific content areas. Each month, a unit presents its work in an engaging way to generate discussion and encourage staff members to make connections to their own priorities. Recently, the work of the Instructional Materials Unit was featured using the theme "Materials Matter," and all staff members were asked to discuss how the increased use of high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials will benefit the work they do every day. The agency also holds a bi-weekly managers meeting and shares regular updates with staff through a weekly email from the secretary.

Ohio used a "World Café" format and design principles to promote internal conversations regarding the content of the new strategic plan. Staff members described, in detail, their hopes for specific students they visualized, which was a creative way of grounding their input on the strategic plan's content. A video promoted the World Café sessions and helped staff understand the process and value of the sessions, which was used to encourage staff to participate in subsequent sessions. Ohio hopes to reach all 550 staff members.

Oklahoma recognized the need to promote agency morale in a manner consistent with the positive tone leadership hoped to set. The state decided to solicit key stories and information from staff and share them through a lighthearted but professional newsletter and social media updates. The goal is to highlight the "lighter side" of the work. One standing item is an article highlighting the employees of the month. One lighthearted story focused on why staff might choose to park in the visitor's lot instead of the designated employee lot.

Wisconsin created a regular email update to provide all staff with basic talking points and critical information about every unit and new initiative across the Department of Public Instruction. Unit leaders are held responsible for providing the short content summaries, and SEA leaders regularly reference the information in their public speaking engagements with different external stakeholders. *(See case study in Appendix I for more detail.)*

Strengthen systems by gathering, listening, and responding to internal stakeholder feedback, analyzing data, and continually improving.

As with any new effort, chances are your first attempt at a new internal communications and engagement strategy won't be your last. Every organization is unique; you will inevitably need to adjust and refine your plan to address the evolving needs of your team and your current reality.

A strong feedback culture doesn't just happen. Explain to your team when and how you will pause to collect, analyze, reflect on, and incorporate their feedback—and be clear that you want and expect them to be candid. Create formal feedback structures, like an annual survey, alongside opportunities for team members to offer ongoing feedback, using strategies such as quick pulse checks, online forums, or small group discussions. When you do make changes, be clear about what is changing and why it is changing—specifically how staff feedback contributed to the decision. This can lead to better internal policies and increased staff investment in the agency's work.

Putting principles into action

Solicit feedback from staff across the agency to identify areas for improvement. Since all staff members are needed to successfully implement your initiatives, ensure all staff members have the opportunity to offer feedback. If you limit feedback to a smaller group, you will miss valuable perspectives.

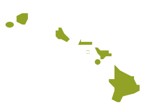
Create a plan for using data to evaluate initiatives before they start and use the data to get better. To make the most of the feedback you receive, in advance decide on your goals for internal communications and how you plan to measure success. Be transparent about the goals and metrics throughout the process. Celebrate successes with staff, and seek feedback when you do not reach specific goals or metrics and explore how to get better together. Setting the expectation for how data will be used, communicating it transparently to staff, and following through on that promise will lead to more fruitful feedback conversations and stronger implementation.

Be transparent about what's changing and how staff input is used to improve internal communications. It's not enough to share *what* is changing; your team should know *why.* Providing the rationale, especially when it is tied to your overall mission, can make implementing the change significantly easier. Explaining how staff feedback was considered demonstrates that staff voices have been heard.

Help everyone improve. Provide ongoing training and development opportunities to help teams hone their communication skills so they become better messengers for the agency both internally and externally. Create a learning agenda that builds over time to allow staff members to become more comfortable in the role of communicator. Consider options like media training, message development, writing workshops, and guidance on how to use social media. Include content-specific guidance as well to ensure they are comfortable discussing and writing about complex topics like equity, accountability, or assessments. SEAs can also offer opportunities for one-to-one coaching or peer mentoring, or support outside professional development for staff members designated as unit communicators.

Strengthen: Examples from the field

California has articulated a process for building its own capacity. This process, which it calls “CDE Team Advancement,” follows the cycle of inquiry that the state uses in all other operations—discover, design, and deliver. Because the success of this capacity building relies on staff participation, the California Department of Education (CDE) is measuring how many staff participate in the cycles of inquiry over time. CDE has also developed “One System Action Teams,” which can support districts seeking to align all their district activities in service of the “whole child.” This initiative required staff to gain new skills and content knowledge—some of which CDE provided at roundtable discussions.



Hawaii uses multiple measures to track internal and external communications. Hawaii considers its employees part of its external audience as well as its core internal audience. In addition to tracking the analytics on its public website (links, clicks, and click-throughs), it measures social media mentions on major websites and benchmarks them over time (month over month and year over year). Additionally, media coverage—both stories the SEA wanted covered and others—is measured and benchmarked. The state also measures engagement on the staff intranet. Additionally, the state tracks internal e-blasts to see how many times they were opened and what links were clicked. This data tell the communications team what content staff find valuable, spurring further content creation.

Illinois observed that their new EdStat and EdSolutions cross-functional teams, which are formed to solve a difficult problem over six weeks, were losing time to work that was not of the highest value, at times drifting off focus, and getting caught up in the reasons why something could not be done. Upon investigation, it became clear that the teams needed a single language for defining and executing on the scope of a project. Now, EdStat and EdSolutions teams review and align on terminology, roles, responsibilities, and expectations at the beginning of the EdSolutions team formation, and use their learning to work together effectively over the project lifecycle. The agency’s Professional Capital unit also developed and piloted a six-session project management training before refining the modules into a two-day bootcamp available for anyone on staff. (See the case study in Appendix II for more information.)

Massachusetts created a cross-agency workgroup to monitor the initial implementation of the agency's internal and external communications plans and to determine if any strategies need to be added or adjusted. The group reviewed and discussed issues including the need for more regularly scheduled unit meetings, the development of a common calendar, new technologies that could support implementation and enable more effective communication, and the need for communications support and professional development. The group of eight staffers met every other week for the first three months and now meets on an as-needed basis.

Massachusetts holds a monthly series of roundtable discussions on content-specific topics that are open to all staff. These discussions are staff-driven, and often staff-led, and sometimes involve guest speakers. Each session provides an overview of key policy shifts or topics of interest, and participation is optional. Recent topics have included new curriculum standards, teacher effectiveness policies, and data analysis tools.

Oklahoma recognized that the superintendent's busy schedule was a barrier to providing all staff with an opportunity to observe her in action. To increase transparency and communicate a message of trust and value, the SEA invited staff to attend leadership meetings every Wednesday morning. Staff can raise specific issues during an open comment period. Also, staff have an opportunity to observe the meeting and gain a better understanding of what is occupying the time and attention of those in leadership positions. Both the gathering of this data directly from staff and increasing staff understanding about leadership's priorities and concerns can drive further feedback and input.

Conclusion

As this resource makes clear, state chiefs will be better positioned to execute on their visions and deliver on improved outcomes for all children when they put in place strong internal communications systems. By building, strengthening, and maintaining these systems and structures, SEA staff will be informed, engaged, and have the information necessary to deliver on the state chief's vision. By using this framework—Discover, Design, Deliver, and Strengthen—SEAs can build a stronger internal communications culture agency-wide and ultimately unlock the full potential of their team.

Appendix I: State Spotlight on Wisconsin

A Meeting, an Email and a Website: How Wisconsin Is Using Simple Tools to Keep Its Team—and the Outside World—Connected

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) had long been known as an agency that communicated well with its district leaders but struggled to keep its own team informed. Units worked largely in silos, and information that made it up to the superintendent's office rarely made it back down to the rest of the staff.

The result, said DPI Chief of Staff Emilie Amundson, was confusion.

"Sometimes our external stakeholders had a better view of what was happening inside our agency than our own staff did," Amundson said. "When you're working in your silo, you can easily report on that, but you have a harder time seeing the bigger picture and telling the rest of the story."

An agency-wide communications audit conducted by Wood Communications in 2016-2017 reinforced this concern. According to the audit, messages to both internal and external stakeholders were coming from multiple senders within the agency and were inconsistent, not always clear, and did not reflect the larger context of DPI's work, mission, or vision.

Over the past several years, that culture has changed as the DPI leadership team has made internal communications and engagement a top priority. Despite the high-tech options available, leadership has chosen three decidedly low-tech ways to stay connected: Holding regular all-staff meetings, sharing a bi-monthly newsletter with concise and up-to-date unit summaries, and posting the information on their website to make it accessible to internal staff and external stakeholders. The result? Staff members today say they are better informed and more aware of how their work connects to the agency's vision, said DPI Director of Communications Tom McCarthy.

"Before, information people thought was being passed along just wasn't passed along," McCarthy said. "People were making incorrect assumptions, and we were playing 'telephone' through our teams. That doesn't happen anymore."

A first step in this direction was the decision to hold the agency's first-ever off-site, all-staff meeting, hosted by State Superintendent Tony Evers. While the initial planning was complex, and a few staffers needed to be convinced to attend, the meeting was a major milestone in the agency's shift to a more strategic

DPI CONNECTIONS

What it is: An email, and soon to be an online document, published quarterly with 500-word updates from each unit at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI)

Who receives it: Every member of the DPI staff; once it is published online, the information will be publicly available and searchable using keywords

Investments: Staff time to produce the content and use of a copy editor for a final review

Staff time needed: 1-2 hours per cycle for each administrator to develop his or her content; 5-6 hours for compilation and final review

Outcomes: Improved agency-wide communications and consistent messaging internal communications culture. Staff members returned with a new sense of connectivity and an eagerness to plan the next meeting.

After that first meeting, a cross-agency planning committee was formed, and as of October 2018, the agency has hosted four all-staff meetings. The meetings include opportunities for staff to participate in small group discussions about how their work is connected, how it ties to the agency's mission and vision, and why it matters. The meeting held in early 2018 focused on equity issues and what the DPI team has accomplished by working together.

"People initially didn't know what to expect and couldn't remember the last time we had all come together," McCarthy said. "That first one wasn't perfect, but most people left feeling better about their jobs, what we do as an agency. Even though we didn't have the content quite right, bringing people together to talk about how we work as a team was critical."

The energy generated by the all-staff meetings led to the creation of DPI Connections, an updated version of an outdated and largely ineffective communication tool the agency had long used. The old version was a quarterly, 30-40 page briefing memo filled with lengthy updates from each unit and shared only with DPI leadership. The goal of the document was to provide the state superintendent with the latest news from across the agency; the reality was that due to its length, inconsistent quality, and outdated content, it was rarely used. Some divisions submitted the same thing multiple times with updated dates; others relied on clerical staff with no communications or policy expertise to craft their update. The content was arbitrary, ranging from grant deadlines to website updates, with no clear format or order. The entire document was printed and placed in the state superintendent's binder for his review.

> ***"People always wanted something like this and told us to keep it going. They want to know what their coworkers are doing and until now didn't have a way to find out."***
>
> **—**Tom McCarthy, Wisconsin DPI

"Many people thought the whole thing was a black hole," McCarthy said.

In 2017, McCarthy and Amundson sat down to map out a new plan for regular updates that would (1) keep the agency's leadership informed; (2) keep the entire staff informed; and (3) be presented in a concise, easy-to-read, digestible format.

The new DPI Connections is managed by Amundson and McCarthy and lands in the email inbox of every DPI staff member six times per year. Each issue contains a 500-word update from each of the agency's six units and a message from the state superintendent that highlights his current priorities and what's ahead in the coming months. Unit administrators are asked to spend one to two hours per cycle to develop their content, holding to the 500-word maximum; each issue is no more than 3,000 words, or about eight pages.

The initial reaction was overwhelmingly positive, McCarthy said.

"People always wanted something like this and told us to keep it going," he said. "They want to know what their coworkers are doing and until now didn't have a way to find out."

After three issues, Amundson said she realized that staff were not just digesting the updates internally; they were sharing them with district leaders and other external partners. This prompted DPI to share DPI Connections externally. In the coming months, DPI will launch an online version of DPI Connections that will be publicly available and searchable using keywords such as professional learning, grant applications, deadlines, etc.

“The value of this goes well beyond just DPI,” Amundson said. “By making this dynamic, we are harnessing information and making it available in a way we never could before.”

McCarthy agreed, noting that he now feels better than ever about the agency’s internal communications culture.

“Internal communications helps people find value in the work they do and makes them feel like part of the organization,” he said. “Even when you’re working toward a common goal, if your role is small, you can feel lost if there isn’t a way for you to stay connected with the work going on around you.”

Appendix II: State Spotlight on Illinois

Building Capacity to Serve the Whole Child in Whole Schools: How Illinois Is Creating Space for Collaboration and Open Communication

In the summer of 2017, Illinois State Superintendent Tony Smith launched EdStat and EdSolutions, an agency-wide collaborative structure designed to engage staff at all levels and generate new thinking and actionable solutions to some of the most vexing challenges on issues ranging from budget to hiring to communications. This is one of the SEA's key activities for implementing continuous improvement. Later that year, Smith announced the agency's one-year goal of having the culture, capacity, and infrastructure to understand the strengths and challenges of each of the state's 852 districts. The internal collaboration, culture of trust, and creative solutions generated by the EdStat and EdSolutions process were integral in meeting the goal.

EdStat and EdSolutions

What it is: A six-week cycle of data-driven meetings (EdStat) and cross-functional team projects (EdSolutions) designed to address agency-wide challenges

Who participates: Illinois State Board of Education staff with close knowledge of the problem and key partners from other departments

Investments: Significant staff time to run the EdStat meeting and to manage and staff the EdSolutions teams

Outcomes: Improved service delivery, efficiency, and organizational effectiveness

Since its launch, EdStat has become a critical problem-solving tool for the agency. An EdStat meeting is used to highlight data regarding an area of emphasis for the SEA. Then, EdSolutions teams are established and work within a six-week timeframe to complete a specific project related to the issue. While some topics squarely fall into a single division's portfolio, the division still must work with others to accomplish the goal. For example, one division is the lead, while other divisions support the project. In other cases, the EdSolutions team's project falls outside any one team's normal scope of work (managing communication flow with district leaders and internal communications are two examples). The team presents its final recommendations, known as EdSolutions, to the agency's leadership at the conclusion of the cycle.

One early topic the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) tackled using this process was internal communications and the challenge staff faced in identifying primary contacts for programs and services across the agency. The EdSolution was the complete redesign of the agency's intranet to be more user-friendly and easier to access. The team conducted an all-staff survey, identified the primary internal challenges, and created an online guide for programs and services that quickly became a go-to resource. All collected data, presentations, and outcomes were posted on the intranet.

More than a year in, ISBE—led by the senior leadership team—is fully committed to the EdStat process. EdStat meetings are always in person, and the state superintendent attends every meeting, which requires setting the schedule a year out—and sticking to it.

This effort launched with an in-person all-staff meeting in Bloomington, Illinois, roughly halfway between Chicago and Springfield, where the agency's two offices are based. It was the first time in 15 years that the whole staff was in one room, said Deputy Superintendent Karen Corken. "Many people had never met in person, even if they had worked together over the phone," she said. "It was a very significant event. We used that opportunity to give people a comprehensive view of the structure and the teams."

Making EdStat work has required Illinois to think deeply about the common language necessary to ensure that teams can start fast and accomplish their goals in just six weeks. The state established a coordinating body and built project management structures to oversee the work. EdStat is run through the office of the chief of staff, which both removes it from any single department and provides EdStat and EdSolutions teams with visibility into the entire organization.

The teams were structured to ensure that senior staff did not dominate each meeting. According to Director of Media and External Communications Jackie Matthews, as the process has matured and staff have had more exposure to the process, the presenters have become more diverse in terms of seniority and expertise. "Now, people are being asked to present as a growth opportunity," she said. "This has empowered internal staff and fostered a sense that the work is theirs to own. It's about getting the right people in the right room at the right time. It doesn't matter what your role is. Hierarchy gets washed out. It's cross-functional—in between divisions."

"This has empowered internal staff and fostered a sense that the work is theirs to own. It's about getting the right people in the right room at the right time. It doesn't matter what your role is."

—Jackie Matthews, ISBE

With this new problem-solving structure, ISBE can advocate for its mission more effectively. During the most recent budget development season, one of the EdStat teams examined the budget book ISBE develops to support its annual budget request. SEA leaders wanted to recommend an overall budget increase to support excellence, but they first had to make a case for restoring the funding that had been previously lost in recent budget cuts. In its EdSolutions, the team focused on how to communicate what the agency needed in its budget in a way that would demonstrate its potential for overall impact and alignment with the board's goals. Ultimately, by making an evidence-based case for a budget increase, the SEA received an additional $1.7 million.

All of these efforts have helped make ISBE's goals, vision, and mission real to agency staff. "They are not just on the wall as a poster, but a guiding force," Matthews said.

Corken agreed. "ISBE created space to innovate and to discuss what needs to change," she said. "This whole effort has helped move from monitoring and compliance to service and support. Individual divisions are working better and helping to tell the story better."

Appendix III: Key Steps in an Internal Communications Audit

1. **Analyze the communications vehicles currently in use**. Consider:
    a. What are your current communications objectives? Are they being met?
    b. What vehicles are currently being used? How reliable, effective, and accessible are they?
    c. How are you using social media to share information with staff?
    d. Who is responsible for these vehicles?
    e. Which do your staff members seem to prefer?

2. **Get feedback from internal staff.** Consider conducting an all-staff survey to collect feedback, and hold focus groups or one-on-one interviews with some staff to delve more deeply into the results. Questions could include:
    a. What current communications vehicle works best?
    b. Do they feel connected to the work happening in other units across the agency?
    c. How do they get their information?
    d. What concerns do they have about the agency's current strategy?
    e. How should staff be involved in the internal communications process?
    f. Are there specific times or instances when they didn't have information they needed or heard about agency work from outside sources?

3. **Compare your internal strategy to the work of your peers in other states.** Talk to your peers at other state agencies to learn about their internal communications and engagement strategy. Identify strategies that work for them that you could tailor and incorporate into your current plan.

4. **Do a SWOT analysis**. Put all of your collected information into a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) table to analyze the data you have collected. This will help you to determine:
    a. communications methods that work well for your organization;
    b. communications practices that do not work and need to be changed in order to achieve your goals;
    c. opportunities you can leverage to improve your communications efforts with target audiences; and
    d. what is threatening your organization's ability to successfully communicate.

5. **Adjust your internal plan.** Once you've analyzed your findings, review and refine your internal communications and engagement plan. Conduct this type of audit at least every other year to ensure your strategies are up to date and meet staff needs.

Appendix IV: Crisis Communications Tools

To effectively communicate with staff during an unexpected situation or crisis, you need a solid plan prepared well in advance. That way when a crisis occurs staff can focus on generating solutions—not on finding information or discussing roles and responsibilities. To be fully prepared SEAs need to proactively plan for dealing with crises using systems, structures, tactics and strategies that staff understand and can put into action quickly.

This appendix includes tools and templates to support your crisis planning and implementation:

1. Strategies for Unexpected Situations
2. Unexpected Situation Assessment Tool
3. Crisis Communications Role-Planning Template

1. Strategies for Unexpected Situations

Discover the communications needs of your staff through continuous, active listening.

You will better understand the needs of your team and develop an approach you can put into action quickly if you take time to prepare for unexpected events. Without sufficient preparation, the situation can get out of control quickly.

Learn from experience. Develop a keen understanding of past crises, their origins, their solutions, what elements of the agency's responses worked well, and which ones were less successful. Talk with staff members who remember past incidents to identify strategies to build into the new crisis plan.

Consider:

- What was the most recent crisis your agency faced, and how was it handled?
- How did staff respond to the way the crisis was handled?
- What were the strategies that worked well? What can be improved?

Adopt best practices from other fields. Public relations, emergency management, and political entities all face high-pressure communications situations regularly. Review their crisis communications protocols and guidance, and pull out elements that will be most relevant for your agency. Furthermore, SEAs can look at other government agencies, large business concerns, and local institutions to understand the crises they prepare for and how they prepare for them.

Consider:

- How detailed are other agency plans?
- How is the development and implementation of the plan managed?
- How frequently are the plans updated?
- What staff capacity is needed?

Design and build a culture of communications through clear, deliberate leadership at all levels.

When dealing with an unexpected or unforeseen event, you need a plan for how to communicate information with the staff and a team of people who know exactly what role they need to play.

Plan ahead. Anticipate and plan for crises that your agency could encounter by proactively developing an internal communications plan that can be quickly activated when needed. Post this in a location that all staff can access, like the agency's intranet, so staff can understand the process ahead of time. Make sure your plan includes how long before the media staff will be notified (e.g., the day before, an hour before, at the same time, etc.), what format will be used to notify them (e.g., email, unit-level meetings, all-staff meeting), and what level of detail they will receive. Consider sharing basic messaging points with all staff to ensure they all have a basic understanding of the situation and could answer questions if asked.

Consider:

- What crises have similar organizations faced, and how have they dealt with them effectively?
- How has your agency handled crisis situations in the past?
- What statewide protocols, if any, should you use?

Build a team. During the planning phase, identify employees in each office/department who can serve on a rapid response team—the people who will know what to do, what to say, and who to say it to when the unexpected occurs. This team should include people from across the agency to ensure all staff members can be reached by someone they know and trust. Clearly define each person's role, including who they will be responsible for informing. Meet with them in advance, during a non-crisis time, to discuss the plan and to provide media training. Quickly replace team members who transition to jobs outside the agency.

Consider:

- Who should be on the rapid response team, and how will they be selected?
- How will you train them?
- How will you coordinate their actions?

Deliver clear and effective communications and engagement routines and processes that inform, seek input, and include the voices of staff at all levels in decision-making.

Tell your team first. Preferably, the information will come directly from you—not from the media or other external sources. When rumors start, your team will be looking to you for guidance. Provide them with a clear, concise update in writing. Depending on the complexity of the situation, consider including a frequently asked questions document that captures and responds to some of their most likely questions and concerns. Create and use a notification system so that you can quickly reach out to employees with accurate information and guidance.

Consider:

- What communications tools and templates should you have ready beforehand?
- What vehicles can you use to most effectively reach your whole team quickly?
- Who can be relied on to be the direct messengers?

Guide, don't block, communications. It is futile to stop employees from sharing information externally via social media or other channels. Instead, provide recommended messaging so the information that is shared widely is consistent and accurate.

Consider:

- Are your employees following your official account on social media?
- If not, how can you encourage them to do so?
- What concise messages can you provide to employees to post on their own social media accounts?

Speak up quickly, but only say what you know to be true. If you are still gathering and evaluating information and are not yet ready to respond, share that with staff. If you share nothing, your team will find information elsewhere—and it may not be correct. Be the first to provide your staff with information, before rumors and misinformation can spread. Share what you can confirm is true, and acknowledge questions that remain unanswered. Even if you don't have new information, let staffers know that, and explain how and when they will hear from you again.

Consider:

- Who should be the primary spokesperson for the SEA in a crisis situation?
- How can you track questions that you cannot answer yet to ensure they will be answered when new information is available?
- What materials and support will other staff need to prepare them to respond to additional questions?

Strengthen systems by listening and responding to internal stakeholder feedback, analyzing data, and continually improving.

Test the system, and then test it again. A great plan will not be successful if you aren't able to execute it. At least annually, test your crisis communications plan so your team knows what to expect and feels invested in its success. Figure out what isn't working and adjust.

Consider:

- How well did your messaging work? How can your messages be strengthened?
- What improvements should be made to your staffing plan?
- What messaging tools were least effective? How can they be improved?

Evaluate and improve. Post-event assessments are as important as pre-event plans. After the crisis, solicit feedback from your crisis team and the team as a whole to identify what did and didn't work well. Use the feedback seriously to improve your plan for the next crisis. Review how the internal communication plan was executed, and determine what succeeded and what can be improved.

Consider:

- What parts of your response plan should you continue using?
- What should you stop doing?

- What components are you missing that would improve your response?

2. Unexpected Situation Assessment Tool

Not everything is a crisis. Use this table to help determine whether your situation has truly reached crisis-level.

Level	Current Situation
4: Highly Intense	• Media has an immediate and urgent need for information about the situation. • State chief needs to provide a statement to address a difficult situation. • One or more groups are expressing anger or outrage. • Broadcast or print media have camped out in front of the agency.
3: Intense	• Local and regional media are paying close attention. • Staff are being contacted for comment from the media and other stakeholders. • Stakeholders and community partners are coming to the agency to discuss the situation. • Affected stakeholders are talking to the media about the situation.
2: Moderately Intense	• The situation is receiving slow but steady attention from local media, and scrutiny is beginning to build. • The public is generally aware but paying little or no attention. • External stakeholders have received media inquiries on the issue.
1: Minimally Intense	• The public is unaware of the situation. • The media has not been notified.

3. Crisis Communications Role-Planning Template

One of the most important parts of advance planning for crisis communications is making sure your team members know the roles they will be expected to play. Completing a simple chart like the one below and making it easily accessible on the agency's intranet will eliminate confusion. Select a back-up person for every assigned role in case of an unanticipated conflict, and update the chart as people transition in and out of their positions.

Crisis Role	Assigned to	Contact Information	Alternate	Contact Information